

interzone

MAY 2002

NUMBER 179

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'The Hamlet A.I. Murders'

Molly Brown

*Stephen Baxter
Martha A. Hood
Dominic Green
Timons Esaias
Nigel Atkinson*

*Interview with
Liz Williams*



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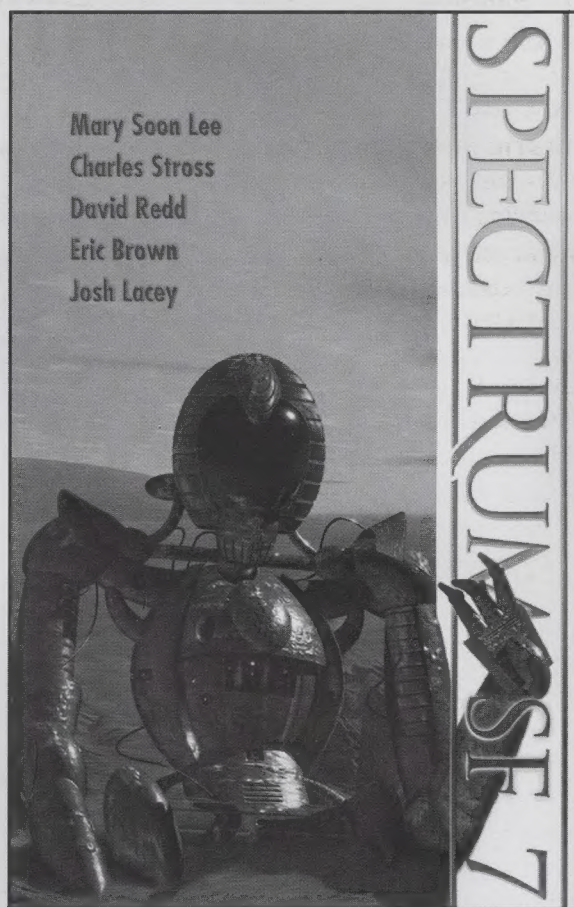
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MAY 2002

Number 179

CONTENTS

Fiction

THE HAMLET A.I. MURDERS <i>Molly Brown</i>	6
THE DREAMING MOULD <i>Stephen Baxter</i>	16
AN EXHALATION OF BUTTERFLIES <i>Nigel Atkinson</i>	27
OSMUND CONSIDERS <i>Timons Esaias</i>	36
THE SCRATCHINGS ON THE WALL <i>Martha A. Hood</i>	39
NEWS FROM HILARIA <i>Dominic Green</i>	44

Features

INTERACTION <i>Readers' Letters</i>	4
VESTIGES OF EMPIRE <i>Liz Williams interviewed by Matt Colborn</i>	21
ANSIBLE LINK <i>News by David Langford</i>	32
MUTANT POPCORN <i>Film Reviews by Nick Lowe</i>	33
ON MEDICAL SCIENCE FICTION <i>Opinion from Gary Westfahl</i>	52
RODDENBERRY'S CHILDREN <i>Media and Television Commentary by Evelyn Lewes</i>	55
BOOK REVIEWS <i>Matt Hills, Paul Brazier</i>	59

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Dear Editors:

As usual, the February 2002 *Interzone* inspired a few thoughts:

1. Concerning J. R. R. Tolkien – I have been trying for years to find out if the poem by Steve Connolly ("God bless the Squire," etc.) was serious or a parody. The first time I met Tolkien, I didn't realize who he was till years later – I was too busy talking to his companion, one C. S. Lewis. Next time it was at a literary luncheon. He sat next to me and pointed to the rather small man at the end of the table, his publisher. "That's where I got the idea for the *hobbits*," he whispered.

2. I much appreciated Zoran Zivkovic's remarks about me and am flattered that I helped him get his MA. As far as I know the only other university thesis on my work was written by a Russian lady. (How about it, England?) I think that someone who translates 16 of my books deserves a special medal.

3. I must confess that my Thogism ("Ansible Link," *IZ* 176, p46) was home-brewed – I had it around for years and was happy to find a home for it.

4. I enjoyed Tim Robins's piece on *Star Trek* – and enclose a piece of history that wasn't mentioned! [*Photocopy of a letter from Gene Roddenberry, acknowledging Arthur C. Clarke's influence on the TV series – Ed.*] I was certainly proud to have saved *Star Trek* – but am even prouder of something that may be slightly more important. I've recently learned that Dr Werner von Braun used my book *The Exploration of Space* to persuade JFK to go to the Moon.

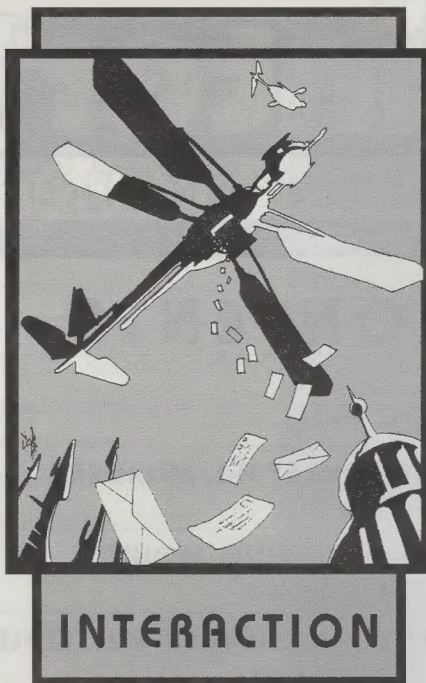
Keep up the good work!
Sir Arthur C. Clarke
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Tim Robins is Partially Right

Dear Editors:

Tim Robins does not know as much about American television as he thinks he does ("Heroes of the Marketplace," *IZ* 176, p60). It is true that television shows in this country [the USA] converted from kinescopes of live dramas to filmed action-adventure series. But one reason he does not mention is that the major movie studios, which originally tried to out-do television through spectacles, 3-D, etc., decided to co-operate with television by transforming B-movies into television dramas. In doing this, they adopted dramatic formulas perfected in radio in the 1940s; in fact, many shows (*Dragnet*, *Gunsmoke*) began as radio shows and were adapted into television dramas.

Colour television became commonplace in America about 1965 (several



years before Britain made the conversion). It may have been true that RCA was advertising colour TV sets in order to watch *Star Trek*, but *Trek* was not an isolated example of this. *The Avengers*, which also premiered in the US in 1966, had to film in colour in order for the ABC network to buy it. And the Walt Disney show on ABC, beginning in 1961, was called "The Wonderful World of Color" in part because this was a way to encourage the purchase of colour-TV sets. (The name changed in 1969, when most American consumers had colour televisions.)

Robins also doesn't understand that American television goes through fadish cycles. In the past five years, for example, we have had a phase of "reality TV" shows, followed by the game-show phase. In the early 1960s, westerns were common, but were fading by 1963. So networks tried shows that were like westerns but a little different. CBS rejected Roddenberry's idea and developed *Lost in Space* (1965-68). NBC went with *Star Trek*. They also tried rococo spy dramas, most notably *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-68) and *The Avengers* (1966-68 in the USA). But none of these shows lasted long enough to reach the five-season/100-episode level necessary for successful syndication. That's why most are now forgotten – except for *Star Trek*.

Martin Morse Wooster
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Letters for publication should be e-mailed to interzone@cix.co.uk – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.

An Alternative Ending

Dear Editors:

I read all last year's *Interzone* stories, and I liked in particular the following:

"The Children of Winter," Eric Brown
"Ravens," Stephen Dedman
"Self-Portrait," Paul Park
"Ascent of Man," Eric Brown (perhaps my favourite)
"Rare as a Rocket," Nigel Brown
"The Frankenberg Process," Eric Brown
"The Invisible Hand Rolls the Dice,"
Carolyn Ives Gilman

One story, Gregory Benford's "Three Gods" (*IZ* 171), began as a good read but I found the end disappointing, especially coming from someone who is scientifically aware about what is now happening to the world. I felt compelled to provide an alternative ending:

"In an eye-blink, intelligence spread across the lands. Leaped into the skies. Spanned between worlds – seeking, seeking. Tiny creatures replicated all over, built cities and machines, and built again, and burnt to build, and for the merest tick of time it seemed as if there were no limits to what they could achieve. Forms of life were simplified, as many species were annihilated. Emissions generated by all those intelligent activities filled the air and changed the atmosphere. Ozone began to disappear and temperatures rose, melting the ice at the poles. The waters rose, now devoid of much life within. The planet's intelligent creatures seemed unable to stop themselves, despite daily catastrophes which destroyed many of their cities. Those who could continued to build and reproduce. They only accelerated their own doom. It was not long – only a few hundred years – before Gamma's beautiful planet came to resemble Alpha's scorched planet. Gamma mourned it, and Alpha and Beta, once envious, now joined Gamma to share this sadness. The planet had truly been the most beautiful they had ever contemplated. Only Omega stood impassable, a Principle, not a God."

Let me also commend the excellent non-fiction in *Interzone*. It is always nice to have "Interaction," the book reviews, Nick Lowe's never boring "Mutant Popcorn" (sometimes he is spot on, at other times I totally disagree, but he has style). Evelyn Lewes's TV column I care much less for. You have run an outstanding series of interviews in 2001. Gene Wolfe's piece on Tolkien was a gem even if one disagrees about some fundamentals. The one area where I was disappointed was the cover art. Like *Asimov's*, you seem to increasingly

rely on generic covers which tell us nothing about what goes on inside, missing the chance to illustrate some great stories that are crying out for it (take Eric Brown's "Children of Winter"). But I am delighted that at least in March 2002 you have managed to have a proper cover for a story. 2002 is looking like a very good year.

Joan Montserrat
London N4

Mists of Avalon

Dear Editors:

I can't tell if Ben Jeapes is being ironic (*Interzone* 176, p4) but *Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley has been made into a miniseries for American TV. It starred Anjelica Huston, Julianna Margulies and Joan Allen and was aired last June:

<http://alt.tnt.tv/movies/tntoriginals/mists/>

Personally, whilst I agree that the miniseries format is the best way to translate sf to the screen I would like to see some original productions of the same calibre as the books Ben lists.

Further to this, the Sci Fi Channel is apparently making miniseries or TV movies of *The Forever War*, *The Chronicles of Amber*, *Red Mars*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Illustrated Man* and *The Children of Dune*:

<http://www.testpattern.net/scoops/scoops.html>

They've obviously read Ben's mind.

Martin Lewis
martin@theculture.org

Female Authors in *Interzone*

Dear Editors:

You seem all too rarely to include fiction by women authors in *Interzone* these days. But for your 20th anniversary issue (no. 177) to contain not even a single female contributor... What a shame!

Barbara Davies
Cheltenham, Glos.

Editor: *I hope we have made up for that failing, partially, this month. However, we shall continue to bear your comment in mind.*

Guide to SF on the Web

Dear Editors:

Whilst I found Peter Tillman's guide to science fiction on the web (*IZ* 177) to be well researched and an enjoyable read, I must take issue with his description of newsgroups as "a bit anachronistic – pure text discussion groups, graphics-free." Whilst I appreciate

that this is a popular viewpoint, I should hope that the average science-fiction reader would have a greater appreciation of the value of the written word. It is one thing to admire good artwork, but quite another to refuse to read books which don't have pictures.

As graphic-focused websites have increased in popularity, the online world has experienced an unfortunate shift in favour of style over substance. Most people do prefer looking at the pictures to reading. Pulp popularity aside, science fiction remains a literary genre, and the quality of available reading material is reflected in the quality of writing of those who discuss it online. The sf newsgroups are among the most coherent and critically astute available. They offer a valuable resource for those who still enjoy reading and thinking about what they have read. In terms of debate, they are very much up-to-the-minute. I should be saddened if *Interzone* readers were to miss out on this valuable resource.

Jennie Kermode
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<http://www.triffid.demon.co.uk/jennie>

More Story Votes

Dear Editors:

Every year I'm surprised by the writers that show up in the magazine from outside the anglophone community – like Jean-Claude Dunyach and Zoran Zivkovic. This last year it was Ashok Banker (although his English is probably almost as native as I suppose is his Hindi). I liked his "In the Shadow of Her Wings" (*issue* 166) not only for the exotic setting but for the consequent, almost ruthless follow-through of the central idea. And his other story, "www.cyber-whore.com" (*issue* 170) was excellent – together with Greg Benford's "Ménage à Trois" my favourite of the year.

If possible – I know it's probably too late but anyhow – I'd like to squeeze in a vote for Tony Ballantyne's "Indecisive Weapons" (*IZ* 172). I found this quite a difficult read since the magazine fell out of my hands every time because I was laughing so hard. Superb!

I enjoyed the 20th-anniversary guest-edited issue (no. 177) a lot, especially Paul Park's "If Lions Could Speak." Considering the first three issues, 2002 promises to be a very strong year indeed!

One of the very best sf books (it's not really a novel but nine linked stories) I've read in a long time is Walter Mosley's *Futureland*. Any chance that this will be reviewed, or do you only review books released in the UK? I do

hope it will because it swept even a fairly jaded reader like me completely off my feet.

Jetse de Vries
JetsedV@cs.com

Editor: *Certainly we review American-published books. However, I'm afraid we haven't been sent the new Walter Mosley. On your recommendation, though, we'll look out for a copy.*

A Word of Advice

Dear Editors:

I'm currently reading (very belatedly) issue 171. I have to say I completely sympathize with Joe Parchelo from Canada ("Interaction," p4). I'm always tempted to rush out and buy new books after reading reviews. But my bookshelves are piled high with books I have yet to read and I always prioritize "Discworld" novels.

My advice is: if your money and book space allow: indulge! I love to buy books by the kilo. It's a good feeling to look at all the books and magazines surrounding me and know I can always pick up exactly what I want to. Let the addiction overtake you and ride it out till the end of your life.

Don't go in for rehab.
Piet Wenings
Goutum, Netherlands

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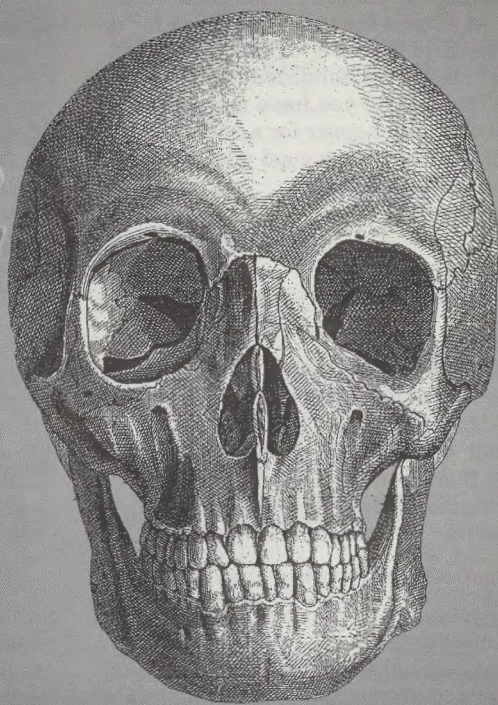
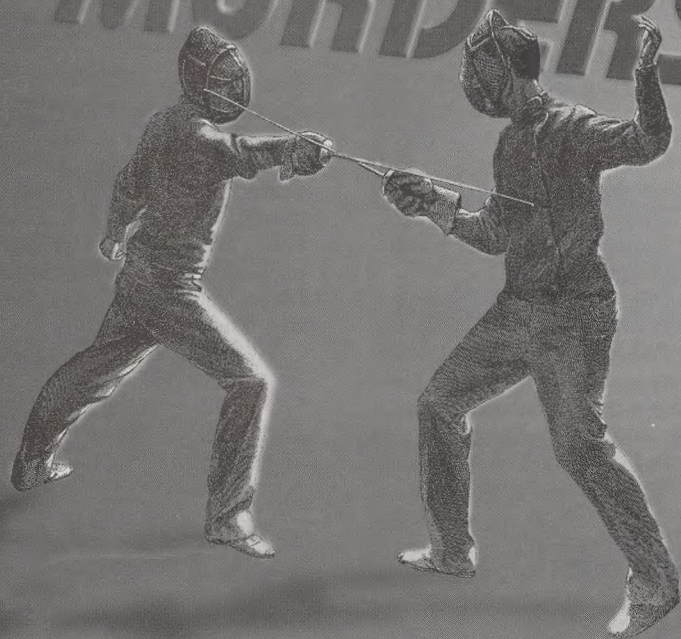
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THE HAMLET A.I. MURDERS



Molly Brown

I had a bad feeling about the castle the moment I set eyes on it.

With its crenellated roof-top shrouded in mist, it looked like the perfect location for a horror movie: exactly the kind of place you'd expect to be haunted by ghosts in clanking chains. The building is a folly: an exact replica of a medieval fortress, built by an eccentric millionaire sometime around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, long before this area became known as The Silicon Valley. It was some kind of hotel and conference centre before the late software king, James Hamlet, turned it into his corporate headquarters.

I pulled up to the gate a little after five p.m. on the 23rd of December. It was already dark and the fog rolling in from San Francisco Bay was getting thicker by the minute. A uniformed guard walked up to my car and asked me my name and business. He checked a computer screen in his hut, then raised the gate to let me through. "Drive carefully, Miss Horatio; we don't want you falling in the moat."

I laughed, thinking he was kidding, but he wasn't. There really was a moat. I had to drive across a drawbridge to get to the visitors' parking lot.

The castle interior was nothing like the outside. The reception area was all chrome and leather, with thick carpeting and recessed lighting. A grey-haired man in a pin-striped suit that did nothing to disguise his paunch sat

on a leather sofa, shouting into a cell phone.

I'd spent most of the morning on the web, researching the Hamlet family. James Hamlet founded Hamlet Systems in 1971, operating out of his parents' garage. I'd found a video clip of him as a bearded young man with waist-length hair, chain smoking cigarettes as he talked about his vision of the future. By the time he married the former model, Gertrude Wilson, he was a multi-millionaire on the verge of becoming a billionaire.

James and Gertrude's only child, James Hamlet Junior – usually referred to as Jimmy – was 24. He'd been studying for a master's degree at Stanford when his father died of heart failure in January. By the end of April, his mother had remarried, hitching herself to none other than her late husband's younger brother, Claude, a botanist recently returned from several years of field research in the Amazon rainforest.

The wedding had been in all the papers, and it was even bigger news on the net. I'd found dozens of web sites with photos of Jimmy Hamlet – a tall young man with sharp features and a mop of dishevelled dark curls – looking sullen in the background as his mother tied the knot with his uncle.

The biggest current topic in the online newsgroups was the impending release of a new software package Hamlet Systems was hyping as "a revolution in computing". The press launch was scheduled for New Year's Eve. Very theatrical. And only eight days away.

I wondered if there was a problem with the new software. Maybe they suspected sabotage, someone on the inside working for a competitor. That would explain the urgent phone call I'd received from Jimmy Hamlet, and his insistence that I work undercover. The story we'd agreed on was that we'd known each other at Stanford and I needed a job.

I walked up to the desk where the receptionist was engrossed in some kind of game. I cleared my throat to get her attention. She didn't hear me over the rattle of gunfire coming from her computer.

The man on the sofa bellowed into his cell phone, "Larry, how many times do I have to tell you? Never borrow, never lend!"

"Excuse me," I said. The receptionist looked up, startled. A series of discordant musical notes emanated from her computer. Whatever the game was, I'd made her lose. "Sorry. And I'll bet you were *this* close to the next level."

She shook her head. "I've been stuck on level three for weeks. How may I help you?"

I told her who I was there to see, and she told me to have a seat. I sank into a leather armchair and started flicking through a magazine.

"Look, I've gotta go," the man said. "Just do what you think is right, okay? Your grandad used to have a saying: 'To thine own self be true.' ...What do you mean, bullshit? ...All right then. Take care." He slid the phone into his jacket pocket, sighing. "My son," he explained, patting the pocket. "He goes off to do a year's postgrad in France and now he says he's too busy to come home for Christmas. Kids, huh?"

"Kids," I said, nodding sympathetically.

The next thing I knew he was standing over me, his protruding stomach uncomfortably close to my face as he reached down to shake my hand. "Leo Polonius, Vice President in charge of Marketing. Anything I can help you with?"

"I don't think so. Thanks."

"If there's anything at –" He was interrupted by the ping of an elevator.

The lift door opened and Jimmy Hamlet walked out into the lobby, dressed in an Armani jacket over a crumpled sweatshirt and ripped jeans.

Polonius swung around to face him. "Hey, Jimmy! I've been trying to get hold of you all day. Where've you been hiding yourself?"

Jimmy Hamlet made a point of ignoring the older man. "This way," he said, ushering me into the elevator.

"See ya later," Polonius called as the lift door slid closed behind us.

"What's with you and Mr Polonius?" I asked as Jimmy pressed the button for the third floor.

He shrugged. "Nothing. It's just... you know how some people always have to stick their noses into everything?"

I nearly reminded him that sticking my nose into things was how I made my living, but decided against it. I concentrated on having a good look at his face instead. His sunken cheeks were covered in stubble and there were dark circles beneath his eyes. I wondered if he'd

been ill.

The elevator door slid open and I was whisked into the middle of an office Christmas party. The company canteen had been done up as a medieval banquet hall for the occasion, the walls decorated with shields and swords, the cafeteria counter draped with a huge embroidered tapestry. About 50 people in silly hats sat at candlelit formica tables. Women dressed as serving wenches moved among them with platters of food and flagons of beer and wine, while a live band dressed as court jesters played a medley of themes from PBS costume dramas.

A man wearing a plastic crown sat at the centre of the head table, beaming at the assembled throng; he had to be Jimmy's uncle, Claude. He'd obviously been quite attractive when he was young. The woman beside him had long highlighted hair, a sunbed tan, and the slightly surprised look of someone who's had one too many face-lifts.

Jimmy stopped to address the woman. "Mother, meet Sylvie Horatio. Sylvie, meet my mother, Gertrude Hamlet. Or should I say Gertrude Hamlet Hamlet?"

Gertrude Hamlet patted the seat next to hers. "Sit down, Miss Horatio," she said, ignoring her son's last remark. She nudged her husband as I settled in beside her. "Claude, you remember Jimmy said he'd be bringing a friend? This is Miss Horatio."

"Please, call me Sylvie."

Gertrude looked up at Jimmy, who was still standing. "Ophelia's been waiting more than an hour."

"I'd better go and talk to her," Jimmy bent down to whisper in my ear, "Just act natural. I'll be back in a minute."

I was aware of Gertrude watching my face as Jimmy crossed the room to speak to a pretty blonde who didn't look much older than 20. I turned and smiled.

Gertrude smiled back, but her eyes were cold. "When Jimmy said he'd invited a friend from Stanford, I must admit I wasn't expecting a woman."

Claude Hamlet leaned around his wife to grin at me. "I understand you're looking for a job."

By the time Leo Polonius joined us at the head table, Claude was introducing me to everyone as Hamlet Systems' newest employee. Jimmy was still deep in conversation with the pretty blonde.

"You'll like it here," Polonius told me. "We're like a big family." He reached into his pocket and took several pictures from his wallet. "That's me and Jimmy's dad, the day Hamlet Systems opened for business."

I recognized Jimmy's father at once from the piercing eyes and the ubiquitous lit cigarette in his hand, but my mouth dropped open at the sight of Leo Polonius as a skinny boy with centre-parted shoulder-length hair, flared jeans and a *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* tee-shirt.

"That's us five years later, at a trade show in Sacramento." This time the two were in suits, and they'd had haircuts. James Hamlet was surrounded, as usual, by a haze of smoke. I hated to think what his lungs must have looked like when he died.

"Oh, and look at this one!" He handed me a photo of

two boys of about nine or ten, standing either side of a chubby little girl with flaxen hair. He pointed to one of the boys. "That's my son, Larry, that I was talking to earlier. There's Jimmy, and that's my daughter, Ophelia. She graduated from Berkeley last year and now she's Gertrude's private secretary."

I looked over to the corner where Jimmy and the blonde were sitting. She wasn't chubby any more. "You have a beautiful daughter."

"It's only a matter of time before there's an announcement, if you know what I mean," Polonius said, winking.

"I hope they'll be very happy."

Polonius nodded. "They will be. I'll make sure of it."

I was talking to someone from accounting when Jimmy tapped me on the shoulder.

I followed him up a flight of stairs to the next floor. We walked along a carpeted hall, towards a door marked: "Research and Development". Jimmy opened the door and we were greeted by the blare of heavy metal, booming from a pair of speakers mounted on the wall. Two men sat with their backs to us, hunched over something on a cluttered table, their heads bobbing up and down to the music. One had a halo of frizzy red hair; the other had a long brown ponytail. Both were dressed in jeans and tee-shirts. "I should have known they'd be here," Jimmy muttered. He walked up to the table. "Hey guys, you're missing the party."

"Too busy," the one with the ponytail said, shrugging.

"Gotta finish this," said the other.

Neither turned around.

"Well at least say hello to my new assistant."

"Huh?" Both men swung around to face us. The red-haired one had a picture of a breast pocket lined with a row of pens on the front of his tee-shirt. The one with the ponytail had the words: "Have you hugged a geek today?" printed across the front of his.

Jimmy waved a hand in the general direction of the two men. "Sylvie Horatio, meet Buddy Rosencrantz and Harold Guildenstern."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Which one's which?"

"All you need to remember is I'm the attractive one," said the redhead.

"Ignore him," the one with the ponytail told me. "Everyone else does. I'm Buddy Rosencrantz."

"Harold Guildenstern," the redhead said, grabbing my hand and pumping it up and down. "You're not really thinking of working here, are you? What's the matter, don't you have a life?"

Jimmy's office was a cluttered room with a window overlooking the R&D lab. The wall behind the desk was adorned with framed photographs and press clippings. Most of the pictures were of James Hamlet Senior, wreathed in clouds of smoke.

Jimmy gestured to the chair across from his. The seat was piled high with old magazines. "Just put that stuff on the floor."

Underneath the magazines I found several unopened letters, a length of cable, and a little statue of a masked

figure holding a sword.

"My fencing trophy! I've been looking everywhere for that!" Jimmy exclaimed on seeing the little statue. I handed it to him and he carefully placed it, facing outwards, on top of the monitor on his desk. "I was captain of a team at Stanford: *The Silicon Valley Swashbucklers*. I've got this great idea for a computer fencing game, if I can just get some time to work on it."

I cleared the last of the debris from my chair and sat down, facing him. "Okay, Mr Hamlet, would you like to tell me what I'm doing here?"

He took a deep breath. "It's my father. I want you to investigate his murder."

"What?" I specialize in internal investigations for corporate clients. I check the accounts for signs of fraud. I advise on security. I install and monitor surveillance equipment. I don't track down murderers. Who did this Hamlet guy think I was, Philip Marlowe?

I should have told him right then and there that murder wasn't my area and he should get someone else. I should have got back into my car and sent him a bill for my expenses.

But there was a part of me that I never knew existed until that moment, a part of me that was rubbing her hands together with glee at the prospect of having a real case to work on for a change, a part of me that couldn't wait to star in her own *film noir* fantasy.

I wasn't going anywhere.

"All the news reports said your father died of a heart attack. What makes you think he was murdered?"

He hesitated a moment before he spoke. "You know what my father was working on when he died?"

I shrugged. "That new software you're launching on New Year's Eve. Some kind of operating system, isn't it?"

"Dad wasn't working on an operating system." He glanced towards the window – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were still sitting at the same table, with their backs to us – then he stood and closed the blinds. "Before we go any further, let me get one thing straight. Anything I tell you, or show you, is strictly confidential, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," I assured him.

"He was working on AI."

"Artificial intelligence? How far did he get?"

"Further than anyone realized." He returned to his seat. "Five days ago, one of the engineers came across an encrypted file on one of the computers in my father's old office. No one in the lab could get through the encryption, but my dad and I had a special password for stuff that was just between us. As soon as I logged on with that password, the encryption vanished. The contents of that file were meant for me, Miss Horatio. Me and no one else." He swung around to face the window, startled. "Did you hear something just then?"

"No, I didn't hear anything. What was in the file?"

"My father. Or rather a download of my father's memories."

"What?"

"Dad was trying to develop an AI that could pass the Turing Test, using himself as the template. That download included his knowledge, his experience, his per-

sonality, his emotions... everything that made him what he was. And when I opened that file, I brought him back.”

“You’re telling me your father has come back as some kind of a computer program? Come on, Mr Hamlet, you’ve got to admit that sounds a little strange.”

“Stranger things go on around this place than you could ever dream of, Miss Horatio. It was the AI based on my father’s memories that told me he’d been murdered. He said my uncle did it.”

I felt my mouth drop open. “Your uncle? But he seemed so nice when I met him downstairs just now.”

“A man can smile and smile and still be a villain, Miss Horatio. According to Dad’s memory download, Uncle Claude has always been obsessed with my mom; that’s why he ran off to South America for all those years, because he could never get over her marrying Dad instead of him. Then one day last January, he turns up out of the blue and actually tells Dad he’s going to kill him! Dad didn’t believe him, of course; he just told him to get the hell out of his office, he was working. Just after Uncle Claude left is when Dad did the download of his memories and personality.

“Two days later, the AI version of my dad was looking out from a monitor on the desk, watching himself take a nap on the couch, when he saw his body go into some kind of convulsion and start gasping for air. He says he tried to call for help – the AI, I mean – but his existence was so top-secret, Dad hadn’t connected him to the rest of the system yet; he couldn’t even send an e-mail. The only thing he was hooked up to was a couple of tiny speakers on the desk, and no one could hear him shouting. Eventually the body on the couch stopped moving.

“Uncle Claude walked into Dad’s office a short while later. The AI hid behind a screen saver and kept quiet, waiting to see what he would do. He says my uncle didn’t seem the least bit surprised to find him dead; he calmly put on a pair of rubber gloves, then leaned over the body. The AI couldn’t see exactly what happened next because my uncle’s back was to him, but he says it looked like he was feeling around inside Dad’s shirt.

“Then my uncle straightened up and turned around. The AI saw this rubber-gloved hand moving towards him, and suddenly everything went black; he thinks my uncle must have switched off the power. Then the next thing he knows, I’m telling him he’s been locked in a storage cupboard for eleven months, and that Mom and Uncle Claude are married.” He shook his head. “That *really* pissed him off, I don’t mind telling you.”

“So this memory download your father did wasn’t just some kind of recording? It can actually see and hear?”

Jimmy gestured for me to come around to his side of the desk.

He pointed to a couple of small apertures above and below the monitor in front of him. “That’s a camera lens: that’s how Dad was able to see me. And that’s a microphone: that’s how he heard me.” He reached for the mouse. “And here’s what I saw.”

I stood watching over his shoulder as a man’s head and shoulders materialized on the screen. It was the late James Hamlet in full colour 3D, and I could have sworn

he was looking right at me. “Is that it? Is that the AI?”

“No, that’s just the avatar he used. It’s based on a full body scan done less than a month before Dad died.”

“So where is this AI now? Can I talk to it?”

Jimmy shook his head. “He won’t talk to anybody but me. He says I have to avenge his death.” He clicked a button on the mouse and his father’s avatar vanished. He turned to look up at me with red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. “This happened the night before last and I haven’t slept a wink since.”

“Why not go to the police?”

“With what? It’s not like I have any actual proof Dad was murdered. They didn’t find anything suspicious in his post-mortem, and though Dad is convinced his brother killed him, he has no idea how he did it. And it’s not like we can exhume the body: Dad was cremated and then his ashes were scattered over the bay from a helicopter. Guess whose idea that was?”

“Your uncle’s?”

Jimmy nodded. “And now he’s married to my mother, living it up on my father’s money.”

I had to admit it looked like Claude had a motive. And it didn’t look good for Jimmy’s mother, either.

“No,” Jimmy said. “Dad says to leave Mom alone; he’s certain she’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Either way, just tell the police what you told me.”

“But what if I’m wrong? You think it hasn’t occurred to me that maybe that wasn’t really my father I was talking to? That maybe it was some kind of hoax? Or even a virus?”

“Let’s have another look at that avatar,” I said.

James Hamlet Senior re-appeared on the monitor, standing with his arms outstretched. He was wearing a denim shirt and faded jeans tucked into a pair of cowboy boots. He lowered his arms and pivoted in a slow circle as we examined him from every angle.

“Pause it,” I said. I studied the frozen image for nearly a minute. Something was wrong, but I couldn’t work out what it was. I turned to look at the collection of photographs on the wall, and then it hit me. “Where’s the smoke? All the pictures I’ve ever seen of your father, he was never without a cigarette. If that’s supposed to be your father, shouldn’t he be smoking virtual tobacco?”

That was the first and only time I ever saw Jimmy Hamlet laugh. “Dad quit five weeks before he died. They told him quitting would add years to his life.”

I spent Christmas Eve reading James Hamlet’s autopsy report. It seemed incredibly thorough; they’d noted everything from the appalling state of his lungs to a “small area of dermatitis” on his right shoulder – even the adhesive bandage covering a blister on his heel – but I couldn’t see anything to indicate that he’d been murdered.

Christmas morning, I switched on the TV just in time to catch the end of an ad for a new brand of nicotine patch. I turned off the sound and reached for James Hamlet’s autopsy report. Jimmy said his father hadn’t smoked for nearly five weeks, but there was nicotine in his blood.

There was no mention of a patch. I reminded myself there were other forms of nicotine replacement, such as chewing gum; but nicotine gum wouldn't explain the rash on James Hamlet's shoulder. So what had happened to the patch?

I switched on my computer and did a web search under "poison". I found dozens of lethal substances that could be absorbed through the skin. I expanded my search to "murders with poison", and found a case where someone had died from handling a poisoned doorknob. I asked myself why Claude Hamlet would put on a pair of rubber gloves before reaching inside his brother's shirt, and then I phoned Jimmy.

I found Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exactly where I'd left them four days earlier, hunched over the same cluttered table in the R&D lab, listening to the same music. Only their tee-shirts had changed. Today Rosencrantz's was black, sporting a picture of Darth Vader above the words: "Fancy a bit of heavy breathing?" Guildenstern's was white and featured a drawing of a sheep in high heels and a pair of stockings, with the caption: "Who says programmers can't get girlfriends?"

"Hi guys. Have a nice Christmas?"

Rosencrantz shrugged. "We were working."

"Jimmy in his office?"

"Yeah, but you know you'd rather stay out here with me," Guildenstern said, winking.

Jimmy was sitting in the dark with his head in his hands, mumbling to himself, "...to sleep, perhaps to dream? No, I don't want to dream when I'm dead. What if all your dreams are nightmares? It's not like you can just wake up again."

"Jimmy, are you all right?"

He looked up, startled. "Shut that door, will you?"

The only source of light in the room was the monitor on Jimmy's desk, its fractal screensaver casting swirling shadows across his face.

"I knocked, but you didn't hear me."

"Sorry, I was just... thinking."

"I guess we all think out loud upon occasion. Mind if I switch on the lights?"

He raised a hand to shield his eyes. "Go ahead."

There was a pile of boards and loose chips on the chair in front of his desk. I cleared them away before I sat down. I hadn't spoken to him since I phoned him on Christmas, and all he'd said then was that he needed time to think. "Have you decided what you want to do yet?"

"Not exactly."

I felt like throwing up my hands. I'd never had such an indecisive client.

He glanced around the room before continuing in a voice barely above a whisper, "I saw Dad again last night and he said your theory makes such perfect sense he could kick himself for not having thought of it himself. But it's still just a theory. Whether to be – or not to be – convinced by it: that is the question! To which I'm hoping to get an answer when we launch the new software

on New Year's Eve. And I promise you, the minute I have that answer, I'll know exactly what to do."

"Why? What's happening at the launch?"

He leaned back in his chair, smirking. "Let's just say I have a little surprise in store for my uncle; I suppose you could call it a kind of dramatic presentation. But I still want to keep an eye on him in the meanwhile, so I'm loaning you to him 'til then, as a kind of temporary extra assistant. Not that he needs one – it's not like he actually does anything – but you should have seen how thrilled he was when I suggested it. He seems to think it means I accept him or something." He bent forward to hit the return key on his keyboard. The screensaver vanished, replaced by lines of scrolling text. "I've already hacked into his e-mail so that anything he sends or receives now goes to me for approval first. His mail will take longer to get through, but he won't notice anything different in his headers. But that still leaves his telephone, his fax and... well, you know what to do, don't you?"

Over the next few days, I became less and less convinced that Claude Hamlet could be capable of murder. For one thing, he never had a bad word to say about anybody. (I know because I'd planted listening devices all over his office and had everything he said on tape.) And he seemed too laid-back to be a killer. When he wasn't in his office, you could usually find him in the health club, which was a left-over from the castle's previous existence as a hotel. He'd either be in the pool with Gertrude and Ophelia (the three of them went swimming every day), or if he wasn't in the pool, he'd be in a little room next to the gym, sitting cross-legged on the floor in quiet meditation, eyes closed and face rapt in an expression of pure bliss.

Meanwhile, Jimmy's behaviour was becoming increasingly erratic. One of the engineers found him in a store-room in the roof, talking to himself. Someone else said they saw him sitting on one of the sofas in reception, turning the pages of a book as if he was reading... only the book was upside-down. And people were beginning to comment on his appearance, wondering aloud when he'd last combed his hair or had a bath.

Jimmy Hamlet was a haunted man; anyone could see that just by looking at him. But were the phantoms that haunted him real or imagined?

The only way I was going to find out was to wait until New Year's Eve.

The combined launch and New Year's Eve party was held in the castle ballroom. The promise of free drink had brought the press out in droves, and the promise of a party, including a fireworks display at midnight, had brought out an assortment of both minor and major celebrities, including everyone from corporate bigwigs to local business leaders, actors, politicians and models. There was barely room to breathe in the crush.

I eventually fought my way over to the food table where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were standing with their backs to the crowd, piling their plates with veg-

etable tempura. "Okay, let's see 'em. What have you got on your tee-shirts?"

They put down their plates and swung around in unison, pointing to their chests. Rosencrantz's shirt was blue, with the words: "This tee-shirt is one of a kind," printed across it in big black letters. Guildenstern's was red, with the words: "So is this one."

"Nice, but what happens if you two get separated? I mean, your shirt still makes sense without Harold's," I told Rosencrantz. "But without Buddy standing next to you, nobody will get yours," I said, turning to Guildenstern.

Guildenstern shrugged. "Genius is rarely understood." He picked up his plate and thrust it towards me. "Please take a bite of my tempura. In certain cultures, that would mean we were married."

I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw Jimmy Hamlet standing behind me, one arm draped around Ophelia. He looked better than he had in days; at least he'd washed his hair and changed his clothes. Ophelia looked like she'd had too much champagne. Jimmy tilted his head towards the front of the room. "Let's grab some seats."

The first two rows were full of photographers. Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and I squeezed into the only remaining seats in the third row; Jimmy and Ophelia sat directly behind us, in the fourth. "Ever thought of becoming a nun?" I heard Jimmy ask Ophelia.

"What?"

"I think you should get yourself to a nunnery. Join a convent. Or how about becoming a Moonie?"

"I wish I knew what your problem is," Ophelia said, sounding tired.

The lights dimmed, there was a swell of music, and we sat through a typical corporate video detailing the history of the company, called: *The Hamlet Systems Story*. When the lights came back up, Leo Polonius was standing behind a podium in one corner of the stage. Leo gave a little speech thanking everyone for coming, and then he introduced Claude and Gertrude. They walked onto the stage, waved to the crowd, and sat down behind him, facing the audience.

Leo began the presentation, talking about various features of the new operating system. He even made a few jokes. "Leo could have been an actor, you know," Jimmy said loudly. "They tell me he was the star of his high school drama club."

Leo eventually announced that one of the exciting new features of the new software package was the "Home CGI Animator", which enabled home PC users to produce their own professional quality animation. "And to demonstrate just a little of what this system is capable of, here is a short animated film written and produced by the late founder's son, our very own Jimmy Hamlet."

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern swung around to face Jimmy. "You never said you were making a movie!" Rosencrantz exclaimed.

"What's it about?" Guildenstern asked.

"You'll see."

I felt Jimmy's hand on my shoulder. "Watch my uncle very closely," he whispered. "Don't take your eyes off him for a second."

Claude was sitting on the far end of the stage, his face and body in profile as he turned to look at the screen behind him.

The lights dimmed once again as the words: "*The Mousetrap*, a film by James Hamlet, Jr.," appeared across the screen in gigantic letters. The film opened with a computer-generated couple talking over breakfast. The husband asked the wife what she would do if he died before her; would she remarry? As the wife protested that she would never marry anyone else, the scene dissolved into a close-up of an open bottle marked: "poison". The shot pulled back to reveal the tabletop on which the bottle stood. In the foreground, a pair of rubber-gloved hands opened a pack of nicotine patches. The hands removed one patch from the box, still in its sealed individual wrapping. One hand held on to the patch while the other reached for a hypodermic needle.

Claude leapt to his feet, obviously upset. He seemed to be saying something, but he was too far from the microphone for anyone in the audience to hear him.

Jimmy's nails dug into my skin.

Gertrude and Leo were also on their feet by now, apparently trying to calm Claude down.

On the floor-to-ceiling screen, the rubber-gloved hands carefully injected the nicotine patch's foil-lined wrapping with the contents of the hypodermic.

The next scene opened with the husband from scene one looking at his reflection in the mirrored door of a bathroom cabinet. Claude bolted from the stage. Gertrude hesitated a couple of seconds, then she ran after Claude.

The computer-generated husband on the screen opened the cabinet door and reached inside, taking a pack of nicotine patches from the shelf.

The screen went black.

"He's switched off the projector!" Jimmy exclaimed. "Why would he switch off the projector, unless he already knew what the film was about? Unless he already knew what was coming next? He's guilty, Miss Horatio; we've just watched him prove it!"

"Interesting," Harold Guildenstern said, turning to look at Jimmy. "Kinda like Buñuel, only shorter."

"Yeah, nice one, Jimmy," Buddy Rosencrantz said, nodding.

Jimmy wasn't joking when he said Leo could have been an actor. He was back at the podium in an instant, covering up so well I doubt most of the audience – who'd been too preoccupied with the gigantic images on the screen to notice the live drama being acted out in one dark corner of the stage – ever suspected that anything was wrong. "Professional quality, photo-realistic animation like the brief snippet we've just seen is just one of the many applications now available to the home computer user. And here to demonstrate some other applications is one of Hamlet Systems' top programmers..."

I turned to say something to Jimmy, but he wasn't there. "Where'd he go?" I asked Ophelia.

She shrugged. "How the hell should I know? It's not

like he ever tells me anything, is it?"

"Did you at least see which way he went?"

She pointed to a side exit below the minstrel's gallery. "He went that-a-way."

He wasn't in the gallery, he wasn't in the tech room behind the stage, he wasn't in the front lobby, and he wasn't in his office. I was about to check the health club when I saw him walking towards me. "Where have you been?" I asked him.

"Looking for my uncle. I was going to kill him. I had every intention of going through with it... and then I found him, sitting on the floor of that little room where he goes to meditate. It was dark – the only light came from a couple of candles – and he had his back to me, but I didn't have to see his face to know what it must look like. You know how he gets that blissful expression, like he's right at the door of heaven?"

I nodded.

"I couldn't bring myself to kill him while he was like that. I just couldn't do it."

By the time we got back to the ballroom, the presentation was over and the band was setting up. A few people were leaving, but judging by the size of the mob converging on the bar, the vast majority were staying for the party. We'd been back less than a minute when Jimmy's mother grabbed him by the arm and led him away.

I didn't see Jimmy again until after midnight. I was outside, watching the fireworks, when he came up behind me and pulled me to one side. "Leo is dead."

"Leo, dead? But he was fine just a few hours ago!"

"It was an accident," Jimmy said. "He was locked in the computer room when the fire safety system went on. It flooded the room with halon gas and he suffocated."

"But that's supposed to be impossible," I protested. "The doors only lock from the outside so that anyone on the inside can still get out."

He looked around to make sure no one was standing within earshot. "Not if someone's stuck a bar across the door, then shoved a filing cabinet up against it."

"I think you'd better start again, from the beginning."

"Okay. It's a long story, but the gist of it is: my mother and I were arguing outside the computer room when I realized somebody was in there, listening, and I switched on the gas." He threw up his hands. "I thought it was my uncle! I never would have done it if I knew it was Leo! Okay, he used to get on my nerves sometimes, but he was my father's oldest friend. They knew each other in grade school, for Christ's sake!"

"So the next thing I know, my mother is hysterical and Uncle Claude is taking the opportunity to play all magnanimous with his poor disturbed nephew, who's obviously having some kind of breakdown! 'Of course it was an accident, *Son*,'" he said. "'Don't you worry *Son*, I won't let anything happen to you; just leave it to me and I'll take care of everything. And the first thing we'd better do is get you out of the country.'" Jimmy shook his head and sighed. "So the upshot is my uncle's hiring a private jet to take me to South America, where I'm going to be

staying with a friend of his... just 'til this blows over. At first I wasn't gonna go, but he said Buddy and Harold could come with me, so I guess it'll be okay.

"Look..." He glanced around again to check that no one was standing near us. "I have to take care of some stuff in my office before I go, and one of the things I'm going to do is write a cheque to keep you on retainer; I need someone to keep an eye on things here while I'm away."

I walked into the castle about nine a.m. on the second of January to find at least a dozen people standing in a kind of semi-circle around the lobby, looking uncomfortable as Ophelia Polonius belted out the chorus of "Like a Virgin." She had flowers in her hair and was wearing a cotton smock covered with bulging pockets, over a pair of combat trousers with yet more bulging pockets down each leg. She wasn't wearing any shoes. "Thank you very much," she said when she'd finished. "Thank you very much. Elvis has left the building."

She walked over to the man standing closest to her, reached into one of her pockets, and took out a rock. "Amethyst," she told him. "For a headache."

The man looked at the receptionist. "You think we oughtta call somebody?"

The receptionist shrugged. "I already called Mrs Hamlet. She said she'd be right down."

The reception area became more and more crowded as people turned up for work to find Ophelia making her way around the lobby, handing out rocks to everyone. "Rhodonite for the heart; garnet for the blood; amber for a bad back; opal for a fever; rose quartz to align the astral body... helps clear up acne, too." She paused when she came to me. She spent nearly a minute looking me up and down before she handed me a stone. "Peridot," she said at last. "For jealousy."

The elevator door slid open with a "ping" and Gertrude Hamlet rushed into the reception area, followed by her husband. "Ophelia, honey, what are you doing here? You should be at home."

Ophelia reached into one of her pockets for a rock and held it out to Gertrude. "Blue adamite: creativity and entrepreneurial thinking, new directions for personal and business growth." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then reached into another pocket. "Moonstone, for hot flashes."

"I'll handle this," Claude said. He walked up to Ophelia and placed an arm around her shoulder. "How are you doin', little lady?"

Ophelia sank to the floor, sobbing. "Oh God, he's dead! He's dead, he's dead!"

"Shit." Claude reached down to pat her on the head. "There, there," he said, looking embarrassed. "There, there."

"What the hell is going on here?" a deep voice roared behind me. I turned and saw a young man with long dark hair and the body of an athlete, standing in the castle doorway. "What is my sister doing on the floor?" So this was Larry Polonius.

Claude went to stand behind Gertrude as the crowd parted to let Larry through.

He knelt down in front of his sister and threw his arms around her. "I got on the first flight, the minute I heard."

Ophelia suddenly stopped crying. "Aliens took me to their spaceship, where I was subjected to medical experiments. They also threw in a bit of liposuction, which was nice of them."

"Huh?"

Ophelia pulled herself free and stood up, yawning. "Good night, ladies. Time for bed."

Gertrude stepped forward to take Ophelia by the arm. "She can lie down on the couch in my office."

Larry leapt to his feet to follow Gertrude and his sister. "What's the matter with her? Why isn't she wearing any shoes?" He swung around to face the people in the lobby. "And what are you looking at?"

Ophelia disappeared from Gertrude's office about an hour later. They eventually found her at the bottom of the swimming pool, weighted down by the rocks in her pockets.

I was heading south from San Francisco when my cell phone rang. It was Jimmy Hamlet, calling from a pay phone at the airport. He said he'd just got in, but he'd meet me at the office later; he had a lot to tell me. When I told him I was in my car on the way to a funeral in Colma, he assumed the funeral was Leo's and said he'd meet me there instead. He hung up before I could correct him.

I was waiting outside the funeral parlour when a taxi pulled up in front of me and Jimmy Hamlet got out, carrying a backpack. Before I could say a word, he'd greeted me with: "In case you're wondering why Buddy and Harold aren't with me, it's because they're dead."

"What?"

"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead." He looked down at the backpack. "I don't wanna take this inside with me. Mind if I leave it in your car?"

"Down here," I said, pointing to the driveway running along one side of the funeral home. "Now are you gonna tell me what happened, or what?"

"Remember New Year's Eve, I said I had to do some stuff before I left?" he began as we walked along the drive, towards the customer parking lot at the back of the building.

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, one of the things I did was to check my uncle's e-mail. And I saw what he'd written to his friend. All it said was something like: 'Two men are bringing you my nephew. Please take care of him for me.' Which looked innocent enough until I noticed that 'take care of him' was in quotes, which made me think, 'This looks like something out of a Tarantino movie.' So before I sent it on, I changed it around so that it read: 'My nephew is bringing you two men. Please take care of *them* for me.'"

"The three of us got on a plane a few hours later, only to discover on landing that when my uncle said he was sending us to South America, he'd meant Bogota, Columbia, where his 'friend' turned out to be a kind of local crimelord. We were met at the airport by some very

sinister-looking men and Buddy and Harold were driven away in a car. I never saw them again, so I assume they were 'taken care of.' It's not my fault what happened to them. They were obviously in on it with my uncle. Why else would he send them with me, unless they were in on it?"

I unlocked the trunk of my car. "I don't know."

Jimmy hesitated a moment, then reached into his backpack and took out a laptop. "I'll just hang on to this."

"It's a funeral. What are you gonna do, check your mail?"

"Oh, all right," Jimmy said, putting the laptop back.

The back door to the building opened. A man in a plastic apron stepped outside and lit a cigarette. "I'm not allowed to smoke in there," he explained. "As if any of *them* are going to mind."

I locked my trunk and turned to go.

"Here for the one o'clock?" the man asked. "Come through this way, if you like; it's shorter. That's assuming you don't mind the sight of a few corpses."

"You work with the bodies?" Jimmy asked him. "Isn't that kind of depressing?"

"I dress them in their nicest clothes, style their hair, put a little colour on their cheeks... make 'em look nice for their final social engagement. What's depressing about that?" He stood aside to usher us through the doorway. "Chapel's straight through those double doors, down to the end, then left."

In a room to my right, several bodies lay on wheeled trolleys. The man reached around me to close the door. "These ones aren't ready yet; they're still awaiting my attention. But the gentleman in *this* room..." he tapped the next door along, "... is not only ready, but raring to go. He used to host a kiddies' show on Saturday mornings, must be 20 years ago now. You two look about the right age to remember him; you ever hear of Yorick the Clown?"

"Yorick?" Jimmy turned to me, his eyes wide. "I knew him, Miss Horatio! Dad hired him for my seventh birthday party, and he was great! He did magic tricks, made balloon animals... everything." He turned back to the man in the apron. "Could I go in and have a look at him? Just for a minute?"

The man in the apron opened the door for him. "Go ahead, kid, knock yourself out."

Jimmy walked up to the table where the dead man lay. "Poor Yorick, where are your balloon animals now?" He shook his head. "No matter how we try to avoid it, this is what we all come to in the end."

The man in the apron cleared his throat. "Sorry to rush you, but you hear that organ music? The one o'clock's about to start."

Jimmy sighed. "Thanks. I'd better go and pay my last respects to the old guy."

"What do you mean, old guy? The one o'clock is a young lady."

"I was going to tell you," I said, "but with all the stuff about Buddy and Harold..."

Everyone turned to look as Jimmy burst into the chapel.

Larry Polonius jumped up shouting something about how dare he show his face after what he did to her, and the next thing I knew, the two of them were rolling around on the floor in front of the coffin.

I was holding an ice pack to Jimmy's eye when someone from product design knocked on the door. "Your uncle asked me to tell you he loves your idea for a fencing game and he's hired Larry Polonius to help with the motion capture."

Jimmy pushed the ice pack away. "When can he start?" "Did I hear you right?" I asked as soon as the engineer was gone. "Your uncle, who you keep telling me is a murderer, hires someone who obviously hates your guts to work with you on a sword fighting game, and you say: 'When can he start?' Are you crazy?"

Jimmy responded by asking if it had ever occurred to me that his game idea might be good enough for his uncle to have spotted the money-making potential in it, and that Larry (who, as a fellow former member of *The Silicon Valley Swashbucklers*, certainly had "the right skills set for the project") might be willing to put personal animosities aside for the sake of a substantial consultant's fee?

"Oh, puh-lease," I said.

The health club gym was almost unrecognizable. They'd cleared away all the exercise machines in order to make room for the motion capture cameras and the fencing strip (a long mat taped to the floor). A bearded man in a Hawaiian shirt sat in front of a workstation while another bearded man tested the cameras. A couple of extra monitors had been set up for the spectators, the majority of whom were obviously more interested in seeing the test run of the optical motion tracking system than in the outcome of a fencing match.

Gertrude and Claude sat on a couple of folding canvas chairs facing one of the monitors. They had a little table between them and a plastic cooler on the floor in front of them. Claude was leaning back with his feet on the cooler. The rest of us either stood or sat on benches. I gave up my seat on a bench to squeeze into the group standing behind Claude and Gertrude; I intended to keep an eye on Jimmy's uncle.

Larry and Jimmy entered through separate doors, their traditional fencing costumes dotted with dozens of fluorescent motion capture markers.

"Come on you two, shake hands!" Claude said.

Larry looked away as Jimmy grasped his hand. "Just like old times, eh?" Jimmy said.

"That's what's we like to see," said Claude.

Jimmy and Larry put on their masks and stood facing each other from opposite ends of the strip, their swords swishing through the air as they raised them in a salute. Everyone looked up at the monitors, cheering at the sight of two rudimentary three-dimensional figures, their bodies formed of criss-crossed glowing lines. The figures on the screen moved towards each other as Jimmy and Larry approached the centre of the strip to stand with crossed foils. The guy chosen to referee the match – who worked in the accounts department – yelled, "*En garde!*" The glow-

ing figures on the monitor assumed the position. Then the guy from accounts yelled, "Play!" and the two figures leapt into action, lunging and thrusting and parrying.

"It's a hit!" the accountant shouted a couple of minutes later. "The first hit of the match is Jimmy Hamlet's!"

The whole room went wild, with everyone cheering and applauding. The cheers turned to groans as the screen in front of us went blank.

"System's crashed," the man in the Hawaiian shirt said.

"I cannae hold her, Captain," someone behind me said in a Scottish accent. "I think she's gonna blow!"

A couple of geeks rushed over to the workstation to see what was wrong. Over on the fencing strip, Larry Polonius ripped off his mask and threw it to the ground. In front of me, Claude took his feet off the cooler and leaned down to reach inside. He took out a can of Gatorade and held it up. "Hey, Jimmy, want a drink?"

"Nah, I'm okay."

"It says on the can it's supposed to be good for athletes."

"I know what it says on the can, I'm just not thirsty."

"But look at the way you're sweating in that costume," Claude said. "I'm worried you're gonna collapse or something."

"I'm not gonna collapse!"

"Maybe you should have something to drink, Son," Gertrude said. "It's awfully warm in here."

Jimmy threw up his hands. "All right! If you insist."

Claude pulled back the ring top on the can just as the monitor in front of him flickered into life.

"Okay, we're up and running," the man in the Hawaiian shirt announced to thunderous applause.

"Finally," Jimmy muttered, putting on his mask.

"What about your drink?" Claude asked him.

"Just put it down. I'll have it later."

Claude sighed and put the open can down on the table.

I was watching the figures on the monitor when I heard Claude say: "Get off. That's Jimmy's." I looked down just in time to see him snatch the can away from Gertrude.

"I only want a sip," Gertrude said. "It's hot in here."

"If you want something to drink, I will get you something," Claude said, reaching into the cooler. "How about a Diet Coke?"

"This'll do fine, and it's already open."

"But Gatorade is an energy drink," Claude said.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means have a Diet Coke," Claude said.

"How come you're pushing the 'diet' drinks all of a sudden? Is this your way of telling me I'm fat?"

"No, no of course not," Claude said, starting to perspire.

"Point to Larry Polonius!" the guy from accounts shouted. A couple of guys from the engineering section booed.

Gertrude stood up. "Jimmy! You don't mind if I have a sip of your Gatorade, do you?"

"Why would I mind? Have as much as you want."

"Thank you," Gertrude said, taking a swig from the can. Claude sank down in his chair, defeated.

I leaned forward to get a better look at him. He didn't even notice me staring at him because he was too busy staring at his wife. I turned to look at her, too, and saw that she was fanning herself. She also seemed to be hav-

ing some trouble with her breathing.

The room was warm, but it wasn't *that* warm.

I was about to ask Gertrude if she was all right when I heard Jimmy's voice. "Ow! Dammit, Larry!"

I asked the man standing next to me what had happened.

"I think the button came off of Larry's foil."

I turned towards the fencing strip. "That was no accident," Jimmy said, throwing down his sword and shoving Larry. Larry threw down *his* sword and shoved Jimmy back. It was only a matter of seconds before the shoving had turned into punching and kicking – which seemed pretty pointless with both of them wearing protective face masks and all that padding. A couple of guys ran over to break it up, but Jimmy managed to knock Larry down before anyone could get between them.

As Larry was struggling to his feet, Jimmy reached down to grab hold of the uncovered foil. He flicked the point across Larry's bare left hand before he turned and walked away, blood dripping from his own left hand.

"Oh God!" Larry wailed. "Oh God, I'm dying!"

"Don't be such a wimp," Jimmy said. "It's just a scratch, and it's no worse than the one you gave me."

I heard Gertrude gasping for breath. I looked down and saw her clutching at her chest. "Mrs Hamlet, are you all right?"

Jimmy ran over, still clutching Larry's foil. "What's wrong with her?"

"She'll be okay," Claude said. "It's just the heat."

Gertrude reached up to pull Jimmy towards her. "Not the heat," she gasped. "Something in the Gatorade..."

I was reaching for my cell phone when I realized half the people in the room were already dialling 911. "We need an ambulance right away," the man standing on my right said.

Gertrude made a horrible rattling noise and fell forward, collapsing dead into Jimmy's arms.

"Murder!" Jimmy shouted. "She's been murdered!"

"Make that the police," said the man on my right.

Claude had risen from his chair and was heading for the door. I ran over to block his way. "No one leaves the room!"

Larry Polonius staggered towards Jimmy. "I know how the poison got in the Gatorade: Claude slipped it into the can when he lifted the ring pull. It was meant for you."

He pointed to the sword in Jimmy's hand. "And there's more poison on the tip of that foil, as a back-up in case you didn't want a drink. It was all your uncle's idea; he talked me into it on the way back from Ophelia's funeral. He said there was no way we'd be caught: the poison was undetectable and everyone would just assume you'd had a heart attack because you're so out of shape. I only hope you can forgive me."

"He said I was out of shape?"

"That's not important now," Larry said. "We've both only got minutes to live."

"You're right." Jimmy handed his mother over to one of the secretaries, then he walked over to his uncle and plunged the poisoned sword into his chest. As his uncle lay dying, he picked up the can of poisoned Gatorade and poured the last of it down his throat. He looked up to see a roomful of people staring at him, aghast. "It's kind of a long story."

I rushed to his side as he sank to the floor. "You're going to be all right," I told him.

"No, I'm not. You'll have to be the one to tell them my side of the story. When the police get here, promise me you'll tell them everything that happened, so they'll understand."

"You can tell them yourself. The ambulance'll be here any minute."

"It's too late for that," he gasped. "Just promise me."

"Okay, okay, I promise."

"Thank you," he said, closing his eyes.

I sat on the floor with his head in my lap, listening to the sound of approaching sirens. I had a lot of explaining to do.

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Molly Brown last appeared in *Interzone* with "The Psychomantium" (issue 116), and we're pleased to welcome her back after a five-year break.

Meanwhile, her very first IZ story, "Bad Timing" (issue 54), has been bought by a Hollywood film company and has reached the script stage of production. Molly lives in Purley, Surrey, and her book *Bad Timing and Other Stories* (containing 21 varied tales, including all her previous IZ pieces) appeared from Big Engine last year.



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The Dreaming Mould

Stephen Baxter

Tomm found a new patch of dreaming mould. It had snuggled into the shade of a damp tree root. Where it had crossed the crimson soil it had left a slimy trail.

Tomm pressed his hands into the mould. It felt cold, slimy, not bad when you got used to it. In the shadow, it had settled down into a grey circle the size of a dinner plate. You often found moulds in shady places like this. They didn't like the brightness of the growth lights. The muddled starlight cast diffuse colours over it, but it was always going to look ugly.

The mould started to talk to him.

As always, it was like waking up. Suddenly he could smell the ozone tang of the growth lights, and hear the bleating of the goat at the Gavil place far beyond the horizon, and he seemed to be able to see every one of the one hundred and twenty thousand stars in the crowded sky.

And then he spread out sideways, that was the way he thought of it, he *reached out*, left and right. The crowded stars froze over his head – or maybe they wheeled around and around, blurring into invisibility. He was with the mould now. And he could see its long, simple, featureless life all of a piece, from beginning to end, pulled out of time like a great grey slab of rock hauled out of the ground.

Even his heart stopped its relentless pumping.

But there was a flitter, a spark against the orange stars.

He dropped back into time. He stood and wiped his slimy hands on his trousers, watching the spaceship approach. He was eight years old.

Kard's metallic Eyes gleamed in the complex starlight. "Lethe, I love it all. Is there any sight more beautiful than starbreaker light shining through the rubble of a planet?"

This was a globular cluster, orbiting far out of the Galaxy's main disc. The sky was packed with stars, orange and yellow, layer upon layer of ancient lanterns that receded to infinity. But before those stars, paler lights moved purposefully. They were human-controlled ships. And Xera saw scattered pink sparks, silent deto-

nations. Each of those remote explosions was the dismantling of a world.

The flitter's hull was transparent because Admiral Kard liked it that way. Even the controls were no more than ghostly rectangles written on the air. It was as if Xera, with Kard and Stub, their young pilot, was falling defenceless through this crowded sky.

Xera said carefully, "I compliment you on the efficiency of your process."

He waved that aside. "Forget *efficiency*. Forget *process*. Commissary, this cluster contains a million stars, crowded into a ball a hundred light years across. It's only four decades since we first arrived here. And we will have processed them *all*, all those pretty lights in the sky, within another 50 to 60 years. What do you think of that?"

"Admiral –"

"*This* is the reality of Assimilation," he snapped. "Ten thousand ships, ten *million* human beings, in this fleet alone. And it's the same all over the Expansion, across a great spherical front 40,000 light years across. I doubt you even dream of sights like this, back in the centre. Commissary, watch and learn..."

Without warning, planets cannonballed out of the sky. She cowered.

Kard laughed at her. "Oh. And here is our destination."

Stub, the rodent-faced young pilot, turned to face them, grinning. "Sir, wake me up when it gets interesting."

Stub called her a domehead when he thought she wasn't listening. She tried not to despise them both.

There were three worlds in this sunless system, locked into a complex gravitational dance. Xera could see them all, sweeping in vertiginously, pale starlit discs against a crowded sky. Only one of them was inhabited: she saw the blue of water and the grey-green of living things splashed against its rust-red hide. It was called, inevitably, "Home," in the language of the first human colonists to have reached this place, millennia before.

Belatedly she remembered her data desk. She held it up, letting it record.

Here in this crowded cluster, stellar close approaches were frequent, and they commonly ripped worlds free of the stars that had borne them. But most planets floated alone. This world, Home, was unusual in having gravitationally locked companion worlds. The nature of their mutual orbit was apparently puzzling to the Academicians, and they had asked her to check it out. Orbital dynamics were hardly her priority. But nobody else was going to get a chance to study this unique jewel-box of worlds.

But already the flitter had begun its brisk closing descent, and the opportunity was over.

Xera was a xenoculturalist. She was here because the inhabitants of Home had reported an indigenous sentient species. If this was true the planet might be spared from the wrecking crews, its natives put to a more subtle use: mind was valuable. The fate of whole cultures, alien and human, the fate of a world, could depend on her assessment of the inhabitants' claim.

But her time was cruelly brief. Admiral Kard's own impatient presence here – he hadn't wanted to spare any of his line officers to check out what he called "earthworm grunting" – told her all she needed to know about the Navy's attitude to her mission.

Now she flew through a spectacular orbital picket of Snowflakes, the giant tetrahedral artefacts the Navy employed as surveillance and communications stations. Then Home opened out into a landscape that fled beneath her, a land of lakes and forests and farms and scattered townships, of green growing things illuminated by floodlights mounted on unlikely stalks.

Kard was right. This was Assimilation: the processing of alien worlds and species on an industrial scale. Out here, you just did what you could before the starbreaker teams moved in. The only consolation was that you would never know what you had missed –

She was plunged into blackness. Impact foam encased her.

Xera felt a guilty stab of satisfaction that Kard and his magnificent Navy had screwed up after all.

To Tomm the flitter had been an all but invisible bubble, sweeping down through the air, with its three passengers suspended inside.

But then it stopped dead, as if it had run into a wall. Its hull appeared out of nowhere. Opaqued, the flitter was an ugly, lumpy thing. It hung for a heartbeat. Then the flitter tipped up until it pointed at the ground, and fell without ceremony.

On impact the hull broke up into compartments that dropped into the dirt. Hatches popped open, and a gooey white liquid ran into the rust-red ground.

Two people tumbled out. They were wearing bright orange skin-tight suits, to which the sticky liquid clung. They staggered a few paces from the wreck and collapsed to their knees. They were a woman and a man, Tomm saw.

The man had silvery fake eyes. He quickly got up and stalked back into the wreckage of the flitter, ripping debris out of the way.

The woman was younger. Her head was shaved. She got to her feet more slowly. She looked around, as if she had never seen stars, dirt, growth lights before.

She looked right at Tomm.

Then she ran to the flitter's wrecked forward section. Tomm made out splashes of blood in there. The woman stepped back, a look of horror on her face. She looked around, but there was nobody in sight, nobody but Tomm.

She spoke to him. He waited as she tapped at a panel on her chest, and a box floated into the air by her shoulder. "... Can you understand me?"

"Yes," he said.

"I need help."

Together they prised open the ripped hull. There wasn't much to see. Opaqued, the hull looked like scuffed metal, and all the pod's control surfaces were blank. But here was a man – Tomm guessed he was the pilot – crumpled up into the nose of the pod, the way you'd wad a tissue into your pocket.

The woman bent over the pilot, feeling at his neck. "He's still alive. Fluttery pulse... Lethe, I'm not trained for this. What's your name?"

"Tomm."

"All right, Tomm. I'm Xera. I need you to pass me a med cloak. In the compartment behind you."

The door was stiff, but Tomm was strong. The cloak was brilliant orange, so bright it seemed to dazzle. Xera just threw the cloak at the pilot. It immediately began to work its way around the body, then it filled up with more white goo.

When the cloak had set hard Xera took the pilot's shoulders, Tomm his legs. The pilot felt lighter than he looked. They got him out through the ripped hull, and set him on the ground.

He lay there in the dirt, wrapped up like a bug in a cocoon, only his bruised face showing.

"He looks young," Tomm said.

"He's only 15." She glanced at him. "How old are *you*?"

"Eight. How old are you?"

She forced a smile. "Twenty-five standard. I think you're very brave." She waved a trembling hand. "To cope with all this. A crashing spaceship. An injured man."

Tomm shrugged. He had grown up on a farm. He knew about life, injury, death.

He waited to see what happened next.

The air was warm, and smelled of rust. The land was like a tabletop, worn flat.

Kard had dumped heaps of equipment out of the flitter onto the ground, and he was pawing through it.

Xera said, "Admiral – what happened?"

"The Squeem," Kard said bluntly. "Dead, every last one of them. All the systems are down. We didn't even get a mayday out." He glanced at the complex sky. "The controllers don't know we are here. It's happened before. Nobody knows how the little bastards manage it."

"You're saying the Squeem *killed* themselves to sabotage us?"

"Oh, you think it's a coincidence it happened just as we came into our final descent?"

The Squeem were group-mind creatures, a little like fish. Once, it was said, they had conquered Earth itself. Now, long Assimilated, they were used as communications links, as a piece of technology. Some humans had even taken Squeem implants. But maybe, she thought, the Assimilation wasn't as complete as it should have been.

Kard's hard gaze slid over the bundled pilot, as if reluctant to study him too closely.

Xera said, "Stub is hurt. The cloak will keep him alive for a while, but –"

"We need to get to the base camp. It's north of here, maybe half a day's walk."

She looked about dubiously. There was no sun, no moon. Even Home's sibling worlds were invisible. There were only stars, a great uniform wash of them, the same wherever you looked. "Which way's north?"

Kard glared, impatient. He seemed to see Tomm for the first time. "You. Aboriginal. Which way?"

Tomm pointed, without hesitation. His feet were bare, she noticed now.

"Then that's the way we'll go. We'll need a stretcher. Xera, rig something."

Tomm said, "My home's closer." He pointed again. "It's just over that way. My parents could help you."

Xera looked at Kard. "Admiral, it would make sense."

He glared at her. "You do *not* take an injured Navy tar to an aboriginal camp."

Xera tried to control her irritation. "The people here are not animals. They are farmers. Stub might die before –"

"End of discussion. You. Earthworm. You want to come show us the way?"

Tomm shrugged.

Xera frowned. "You don't need to tell your parents where you are?"

"You're the Navy," Tomm said. "We're all citizens of the Third Expansion. That's what we were told, before you came. What harm can I come to with you?"

Kard laughed.

The ground was densely packed crimson dirt, hard under her feet.

Soon she was puffing with exertion, her hips and knees and legs dryly aching. After half a year in the murky gut of a Spline ship Xera wasn't used to physical exercise. At least the ground was level, more or less. And Stub, on his improvised stretcher, wasn't as heavy as he should have been. Evidently the smart med-care cloak contained some anti-gravitational trickery.

Stub wasn't improving, though, despite the cloak's best efforts. Around his increasingly pale face, the cloak's hem glowed warning blue.

Kard, a scavenged bundle on his back, walked stiffly, with obvious distaste for the very dirt under his feet.

The boy, Tomm, just seemed interested.

Away from the cultivated areas the ground looked nutrient-leached, and the only hills were eroded stumps, as dust-strewn as the rest. This was an old place, she thought. And the population was evidently sparse, no

more than this worn-out land could support.

And the sky was baffling.

Xera had grown up on a small planet of 70 Ophiuchi, less than 17 light years from Earth itself. There, in the Galaxy's main disc, 3,000 stars had been visible in the night sky. Here there were *40 times* as many. Shoals of stars swam continually above the horizon, casting a diffuse light laced with pale, complex, shifting shadows. There were too many of them to count, to identify, to track. This world knew no day, no night, only this unchanging, muddy starlight; here, time washed by unmarked.

They had to cross a cultivated field. A floodlight bank loomed over the green growing things, presumably intended to supplement the starlight.

Kard hauled a semi-transparent suit out of the scavenged bundle he carried, and tied off the arms and legs. "You," he said to Tomm. "Take this. We need supplies."

Xera made to protest at this petty theft of somebody else's crop. But Tomm was already running alongside Kard's long strides. They began pulling handfuls of green pods into the tied-off suit. Xera waited by Stub.

Kard snapped, "Tell me what you eat here."

"Peas," said Tomm brightly. "Beans. Rice. Wheat."

"No replicators?"

Xera said, "Admiral, Tomm's ancestors are here because they fled the Qax Occupation of Earth, 7,000 years ago. Nano replicators are Qax technology. To the colonists here, such things are hated."

Kard glanced around. "So how did they terraform this place?"

"The hard way. Apparently it took them centuries."

"And now they grow wheat."

"Yes."

Kard laughed. "Well, our suits will filter out the toxins."

"We have goats too," said the boy.

"Oh, imagine that."

They came to an ancient, tangled tree, and Kard bent to inspect its roots. He pulled out a handful of what looked like fungus. "What's this?"

"Dreaming mould," said Tomm.

"Say what?"

Xera hurried over. "That is why we're here. It's a relic of the native ecology, spared in the terraforming."

Kard hefted the greyish stuff. "*This* is supposed to be sentient?"

"So the locals claim."

"It can't even *move*."

"It can," insisted Tomm. "It moves like slimy bugs."

Xera held up her data desk, showing Kard images. "On the move it absorbs nutrients from organic detritus, local analogues of leaves and grass. Then the protoplasm hardens into a definite shape. In some species you get little parasols and rods as the mould prepares to fruit." This organism was actually like the slime moulds of Earth: a very ancient form from a time when categories of life were blurred, when the higher plants had yet to split off from the fungi, and all animal life had streamed in protoplasmic shapelessness.

What was more controversial was whether these

moulds were sentient, or not. Already she was wondering how she could complete her assessment – how could she possibly *tell*?

Kard saw her doubts.

“Admiral – ”

He turned to the kid. “How can this mould of yours be so smart if it can’t use tools?”

“They used to,” said Tomm.

“What?”

“Once they built starships. They came from over there.” He pointed into the murky roof of stars – but the way he was pointing, Xera realized, was towards the Galaxy’s main disc.

She asked, “How do you know such things?”

“When you touch them.” The boy shrugged. “You just know.”

“And why,” Kard asked, “would they come to a shithole like this? It hasn’t even got a sun.”

“They didn’t want a sun. They wanted a sky like that,” pointing up.

“Why?”

“Because you can’t tell the time by it.”

Kard was glaring at Xera, hefting the mould. “Is *this* all there is? What in Lethe are we doing here, Commissary?”

“Let’s just try on the idea before we dismiss it,” Xera said quickly. “Suppose there was an ancient race, done with – ” she raised a hand at the sky, where worlds burned “ – with all this. Colonizing, building – ”

Kard snapped, “So they came to this worn-out dump. They dismantled their starships, and dissolved into slime. Right? But it isn’t even *safe* here. Have you any idea what it would be *like* to live through a Galaxy plane-crossing?” He shook his head. He threw the native life form into the hopper, along with the pea pods and runner beans.

“Admiral – ”

“End of discussion.”

On they walked.

The stars were sombre. Most were orange or even red, floating silently in their watchful crowds. All the stars were old.

Even the planets were so old the radioactivity trapped in their interiors had dwindled away. Which explained the exhausted landscape: no tectonics, no geology, no mountain-building.

This was what you got in a globular cluster. Like a diffuse planet, this whole cluster orbited the core of the Galaxy. Every hundred million years it plunged through the Galaxy’s disc, and in those catastrophic interludes all the dust was stripped out of the spaces between the stars. Thus there was nothing to make new stars out of.

Of course Kard was right about the hazards of a main disc crossing. This planet would be bombarded with spiral-arm hydrogen and dust. A single dust grain would deliver the energy of a fission bomb. The place would be flooded with X-rays, if the atmosphere wasn’t stripped off completely.

Maybe, maybe, she thought. But – she learned, check-

ing her data desk, which she’d hung around her neck – the last plane crossing was only a couple of million years ago. There were nearly a hundred megayears yet before that calamity had to be faced again. Time enough for anybody.

Kard stopped again, breathing hard. “Take a break.” He dumped the stretcher and squatted down, took a handful of peas from his improvised backpack, and crammed them into his mouth, pods and all.

The suit had extracted some water from the vegetable matter. Xera took one of its sleeves and dribbled water into the mouth of Stub. His breathing was irregular, and his face was pasty. She opened the cloak a little at his neck, trying to make him easier.

Kard was half-watching. He recoiled from the stink that came out of the cloak, an earthy melange of blood and shit, the smell of a wounded human. “Lethe, I hate this.” He turned away. “You think the base is far?”

“I don’t know.” She studied him, surprised. He seemed uncertain. “Not far, surely.”

He nodded, wordless, not looking at her.

Tomm sat quietly and watched them, bare feet tucked under his legs. He didn’t ask for food or drink. Of the three of them he was by far the freshest.

Xera glanced again at her data desk. It had been working on the observations she’d been able to make before the landing. Now the desk showed that Home and its two siblings were locked into a figure-of-eight orbital motion. It was an exotic, but stable, solution to the ancient problem of how three bodies would swarm together under gravity. More common solutions resembled planets conventionally orbiting a sun, or three worlds at the corners of a rotating equilateral triangle.

She tried to describe this to Kard. He knew a lot more about orbital dynamics than she did. But he wouldn’t discuss it. He was definitively not interested.

Xera pulled the dreaming mould out of the tied-up suit. A little dehydrated, it was cold to the touch but not unpleasant. She could tell nothing by just looking at it.

Uncertainly she handed it to Tomm.

The boy pressed his hands against the mould. He looked vaguely disappointed. “This one’s too dry.”

“Tomm, what happens when you touch the mould?”

“Like if you’re sick.” Tomm shrugged. “The mould helps you.”

“How?”

He said some things the floating translator unit couldn’t handle. Then he said, “Time stops.”

Kard sat up. “Time stops?”

“Like that. The mould doesn’t see time – ” Tomm made chopping motions. “One bit after another. Step, step, step. It sees time all as a piece. All at once.”

Kard raised hairless eyebrows.

She felt like defying him. “We need to keep open minds, Admiral. We’re here to seek out the strange, the unfamiliar. That’s the whole point. We know that time is quantized. Instants are like grains of sand. We experience them linearly, like a bug hopping from one grain to another. But other perceptions of time are possible. Perhaps – ”

Kard looked disgusted. “These dirt-diggers would call

my ass sentient if it would hold back the starbreakers one more day." He leaned towards the boy, who looked scared. "Planets are rare here, in a globular cluster. That's why we need to blow up your world. So we can use what's inside it to make more ships and weapons."

"So you can blow up more worlds."

"Exactly. Slime mould and all."

"Isn't that what the Qax did to humans?"

Xera choked a laugh.

Kard glared. "Listen to me. You're just a snot-nosed earthworm kid and I'm a Rear Admiral. And any time I want to I could –"

Stub's med cloak abruptly turned bright blue.

Xera hurried to him. Tomm stared. Kard swore, stood up and walked away.

Xera felt for a pulse – it was desperately feathery – and bent her ear to Stub's mouth, trying to detect a breath. I'm here to stand in judgement on another race, perhaps much more ancient than my own, she thought. But I can't even save this wretched boy, lying in the dirt.

Kard stalked around. The crimson dust had stained his gleaming boots. "We walked all this way, for nothing."

"It was your call," she snapped. "If we had gone to the farmers for help, maybe we could have saved him."

Kard wasn't about to accept that. He turned on her. "Listen to me, Commissary –"

Tomm was pressing bits of the dreaming mould into Stub's mouth.

Kard grabbed Tomm's arm. "What are you doing?"

"The mould wants to help him. This is what we do."

Xera asked quickly, "When you hurt, when you die, you do this?"

"You take him out of time."

Kard said, "You'll choke him, you little grub."

"Admiral, let the kid go."

He said dangerously, "This is a Navy man."

"But we failed him, Kard. The cloak can't help. *He's dying*. Let the boy do what he wants. If it makes him feel better..."

Kard's face worked. But he broke away.

Bleakly, helplessly, Xera watched the boy patiently feed bits of the mould into the pilot's mouth.

You take him out of time.

Could it be true? How would it be to loosen the grasp of time – to have a mind filled with green thoughts, like a vegetable's perhaps – to be empty of everything but self? Kard had said the mould had no goals. But what higher goal could there be? Who needed starships and cities and wars and empires, when you could free yourself at last of the fear of death? And what greater empathy could there be than to share such a gift with others...?

Or maybe the mould was just some hallucinogen, chewed by bored farmers.

Stub's breathing, though shallow, seemed a little easier.

She said, "I think it's working."

Kard wouldn't even look down. "No."

"Admiral –"

"*There's nothing here, Commissary.*" He turned on her and spoke rapidly. "I know the sentience laws. Even if all

this is true, you have no case. What defines intelligence? You need to have goals, and pursue them. What goals has a slime mould got? You need to have empathy: some kind of awareness of intelligence in others. And, most fundamentally, you need a sense of *time*. Life can only exist in a universe complex enough to be out of equilibrium – there could be no life in a mushy heat bath, with no flows of energy or mass. So tracking time is fundamental to intelligence, for a sense of time derives from the universal disequilibrium that drives life itself. *There*. If these creatures really don't have a time sense they *can't* be intelligent. How do you answer that?"

She pressed her fingers to her temples. "Admiral – the history of human understanding is about discarding prejudices, about ourselves, about others, about the nature of life, mind. We have come a long way, but we're still learning. Perhaps even an insistence on a time sense itself is just another barrier..."

Kard, she could see, wasn't listening.

But, she thought, it isn't about the sentience laws, is it? You can't accept that you made the wrong call today. Just as you can't accept that the humble creatures here, the farmers and this boy and even the mould, might know something you don't. You'd rather destroy it all than accept that.

Data scrolled across her desk. She glanced down. The desk had continued patiently to work on the orbital data. The figure-of-eight configuration was *rare*, the desk reported now, vanishingly unlikely.

Surely too improbable to be natural.

She felt wonder stir. Had they been vain, at the last? Before they dissolved down into this humble form, even gave up their shape, had they left a grandiose dynamic signature scrawled across the sky...?

But it's too late, too late. This place will be destroyed, and we'll never know.

Kard stalked about the orange dirt, restless, trapped on the ground. "You know what? None of this matters. Your petty moral dilemmas are irrelevant, Commissary. Because the Assimilation is nearly over. There's nothing left to oppose us now – nothing left between us and the Xeelee." Kard raised his engineered face. "Lethe, I hate this, the dust and the pain. The sooner I get back to the sky the better."

"I have an assessment to finish –"

"Nothing happened here, Commissary. *Nothing*."

Tomm sat back, smiling.

It seemed to Xera that the young pilot's face relaxed, that he breathed a little easier, before he was still.

Stephen Baxter last appeared in *Interzone* with "Tracks" (issue 169), and has been one of the magazine's most regular contributors since his first published story, "The Xeelee Flower" (issue 19, Spring 1987). He has recently completed publication of two sf trilogies, the "Mammoth" saga and the more ambitious "Manifold" novels, and has also published two non-fiction books in the past year or so (*Deep Future* and *Omegatropic*, both 2001). His collection, *Phase Space*, and his next novel, a freestanding work called *Evolution*, are due to appear in 2002.

VESTIGES of EMPIRE

Liz Williams

interviewed by

Matt Colborn

Liz Williams's second novel, *Empire of Bones*, depicts an alien contact in a future India. It's an exotic and exciting tale about a meeting of utterly contrasting cultures, and is told through the eyes of some very diverse individuals. I met Liz at her home in Brighton where we discussed her new book and its predecessor, *The Ghost Sister*, which was nominated for the 2001 Philip K. Dick Award. We conducted the interview in her front room which, like the rest of the flat, is crammed with books on pretty much every topic under the sun, reflecting the author's impressive eclecticism. I began by asking her about her latest novel's origins.

"It's a British Empire novel," she says, "about the British in India – a lot of writers seem to have that baggage if they come from this part of the world, and it was a look at issues of colonies and colonialism. The aliens in *Empire of Bones* feel that they are superior to the people they come across. They think they're bringing enlightenment and civilization to a benighted part of the galaxy. This attitude dovetails very much with the British view of what, idealistically, they were trying to achieve in India. The fact that

India was in reality colonized by some extraordinarily dubious criminal types isn't necessarily reflected in the novel, but it is certainly true in history."

Liz seemed to be at great pains to show the Indian, or "Bharati," point of view. How hard was it to maintain that?

"Quite hard. I was terrified of getting it wrong, and I almost certainly have got it wrong, obviously coming from another culture entirely, and in fact, coming from the previously dominant culture in terms of the colonial relationship between India and England. How far is one perpetuating that relationship of patronage, for example, by writing something set in that culture? It's something that I find unsettling, and would expect some comeback on, perhaps, from someone from that cultural background."

Liz actually visited India in 2001. How different was it from her expectations?

"It was very different from some of my expectations. I've lived in central Asia, but not in India and it's a fascinating culture in that it still retains a semi-Anglicized veneer in some respects – the press, for example. It's a rich culture, and it varies astonishingly from province to province and from region to region, and from language area to language area, so I don't think I covered even a small part of it. I think I only touched on certain superficial details."

In the novel the aliens have a caste system, which seems to reflect in some ways the reinstated caste system in the future India that we're shown. What were Liz's thoughts in highlighting the caste system like this?

"The caste system interests me because I think in some sense Britain is a caste-based culture which pretends it's not, because we in turn were colonized by successive waves of invaders, ending with the Normans. The British class system is actually the vestiges of a caste system, so it interests me from a personal, social point of view. It's much more pronounced in India, because they've retained such a system over a much longer period. I'm certainly critical of it; I'm critical of all caste systems."

As the caste system is part of Hindu culture, couldn't you argue that that's a colonial point of view?

"Yes, I think one can. But it's a very interesting point as to how far one can actually take cultural relativism. I'm not a relativist, though I don't really see at the moment any satisfactory way of resolving the tension between relativism and absolutism. I think that's the great philosophical puzzle of the age, possibly the great philosophical puzzle of all ages. I think, however, that if people from within that culture criticize it themselves, and ask for input from others – which obviously hasn't happened in terms of this novel, but is done on a political, radical basis – then

I think one is entitled to have an opinion. There's a very strong active voice against caste in India, but it gets repressed. A lot of it comes from the 'untouchable' caste."

In fact, the protagonist, Jaya, is a woman from an untouchable caste herself, and has a central role in fomenting an – albeit failed – revolution. In the end, however, something completely different happens because she turns out to be a receiver for the aliens.

"What I wanted to impart was a level of ambiguity in her relationship to her own culture, and her relationship with the aliens, because there is a sense in which, if she is not a collaborator now in a colonial system, then she is certainly well on the way to becoming one. I wanted to try to explore the tensions inherent in that, and also to highlight just how far the British in India imposed a particularly negative system of their own. I mean they didn't really bring civilization; they tried to exploit the caste system for their own economic and strategic ends, and this is basically what the Rasasatrans are going to do for Earth."

The alien at the end is very British.

"He is a parody, yes," she says, laughing. "I had a lot of fun with him. He's a parody of an upper-class twit, basically. He's the idiot civil servant who comes in. I wanted to call the book *The Alien Civil Servant*, but they wouldn't let me!"

Was it a consciously comedic book?

"Yes, it was. I certainly wouldn't want people to say that it was unintentionally funny! I did try to make it dry, at least."

The most sympathetic alien – Sirru – arrives on Earth and misinterprets a lot of things that he encounters in terms of his own culture. This is especially

noticeable when he has an encounter with the prostitute, Rajira.

"That's not only communication difficulties between aliens and humans," Liz points out, "or between cultures, it's communication difficulties between genders, which I just thought it would be fun to play with. The British are renowned for getting it so wrong when they go abroad (if they speak louder, people will somehow understand them, and that kind of thing). I think that's waning, but it is an amusing and an irritating aspect to the British, which I wanted to play with. I've lived in ex-pat communities in central Asia, and they are quite often thoroughly unpleasant people. I didn't want to make Sirru unpleasant, because he is my protagonist, but I did want to show that he doesn't really have a clue what's going on."

But Sirru is a hero in the book because he's from a caste which is being persecuted, but he's still part of the system. In terms of her own culture, Jaya could be seen in the same way. With Jaya, though, we're also presented with a parody of her, played by a Bollywood film star. The Bharati government, having reviled her as a terrorist, is trying to rehabilitate her image because she's the only contact with the aliens they have.

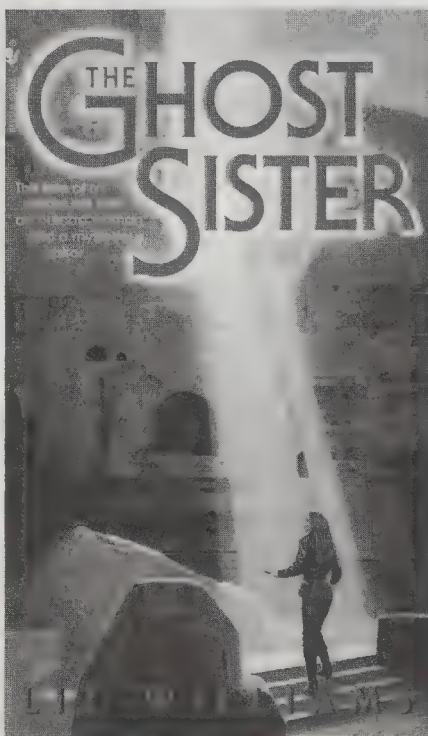
"I've just come across a quote from a Russian author which says that he is really more interested in the failures than in the heroes, because the failures are more likely to reflect us than the heroes. A hero actually is very much a reflection of that society's expectations, not the reality. It's the old cliché that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

"Jaya herself is actually based upon a real person – she's based on Phoolan Devi, who was gunned down not far from Varanasi late in 2001, pretty much the week that I finished the novel, which was disconcerting. Jaya's background is less extreme than Devi's, because Devi really did go through absolute hell, whereas Jaya had a relatively privileged, if peculiar, upbringing relative to her circumstances."

"The thing about Devi's real-life revolt was that it was very much caste-based. She wasn't an untouchable, but she did come from a very low caste, or that's my understanding of her background, and she was brought up in Bihar which was the next state along to Uttar Pradesh, so it's relatively close, but it's a particularly lawless part of the country, and it was strongly recommended that we not go there. So Phoolan Devi's experiences, again, are not necessarily typical, but I'm not sure you can speak of typical experiences in a continent as huge and varied as India."

It could almost be seen as another colonial attitude if you did!

"Yes," acknowledges Liz. "It's the view that everybody falls into neat little



boxes, and you can just put them where you want them to fall. People are much more complex than that. I wanted to bring that out in Jaya. She's not necessarily a typical warrior heroine; she's a lot of things."

Is that why Liz included the film-star character, Kharishma Kharim?

"Yes, it's why I had the film star, and also in fact why I used the disease. I had Jaya effectively crippled, because she is a great many things. There is a tension between her being a goddess and her being effectively a terrorist. There's also a tension between her being physiologically an old woman, whilst still being young."

Jaya's father is an Illusionist, but she seems to be looking for something more, beyond the illusion. Are there parallels with Liz's own life there?

"There are, although my own dad is not by any means the abusive conjuror that Jaya's father is. I was brought up by someone who was an amateur conjuror – although he worked in a bank for most of his life, magic was his great hobby and his great interest. I grew up in a house that was full of magical implements, and full of books on magic – stage magic as well as more occult stuff. I was enthralled from a very early age by – just what is magic? What is this crazy stuff with illusion and trickery?"

Was the occult there as well?

"Yes, it was. We had a load of books on all sorts of stuff. We had a lot of things on Elizabethan magic, which is where the next book comes in, because that's all about Elizabethan magic and alchemy, and John Dee.

"Jaya herself wants to believe in something, and that's turning out to be another thread in my own work, people who really do want to believe in something, want to have faith, but they can't quite muster it."

Because this yearning blows up in her face, doesn't it?

"It does, yes. It blows up several times, in fact. The oracular thing definitely blows up, and so does her contact with the aliens."

The alien who first contacts Jaya telepathically, Ir Yth, acts in many ways like a civil servant. Liz confirms that this angle was deliberate. The alien Ir Yth is also quite treacherous, but it becomes clear that she's acting on orders from her caste. It's also clear that she miscalculates the outcome of her actions on several occasions.

"Ir Yth is a minor cog in a really huge machine, and she actually has responsibilities that exceed her competence. I just thought it would be fun to have a villainess who instead of being some seductive, hypnotic Mata Hari type, as they tend to be, was a short and stumpy civil servant."

Ir Yth gets involved with Tokai, a

Japanese billionaire, and discovers that Selenge, the disease that the lower castes in India suffer from, is artificial. Was Liz playing with rumours about the artificial origins of diseases like AIDS?

"Yes, and also what colonial powers do to countries, because a lot of this book started from looking at disease – how diseases were deliberately or accidentally spread through colonization. I think there are interesting parallels between the vectors of knowledge and the vectors of disease."

The communications system of the Rasasatrans, which is seeded on Earth by Sirru, is a virus of a sort.

"Right. Knowledge is a disease, communication is a disease, that can be described as contagious."

Playing devil's advocate, I wonder whether there are any good points about this particular alien invasion....

"My inner fascist says yes, there probably are, because they will clean up Earth. We won't have horrible, contagious, real diseases, we won't have starvation, we won't have war. The trains will run on time! The disadvantages remains to be seen. It probably won't be very appealing."

The alien civil servant mentions the remodifying of humanity, which sounds fairly horrific.

"Yes," Liz acknowledges. "I don't quite know what they're going to do, but it isn't going to be terribly pleasant. It's not going to be too major, I don't think, but it will certainly be a cultural shock."

Humanity, in other words, has lost its freedom. Was this the central point Liz was making about colonial power?

"It's partly the point, not just from my knowing a little bit about India, but also from my having lived in a colonized country, which was Kazakhstan. The

Russians took a very similar attitude towards the Kazakhs that the British took towards the Indians – basically, disregarding centuries of history, that they were barbarians, and they needed to be civilized, and civilized quick. That extremely hypocritical and inauthentic position is one that has had quite severe repercussions on the Russians, and, indeed, on all of us, as we're seeing with Afghanistan. I don't have a great deal of faith in the ability of colonizers to sustain their colonies, but there is also the point that the situation is much more complex than it appears. It's not just 'good tribespeople versus evil colonial oppressors,' because the Kazakhs in particular recognize that the Soviet Union brought them an awful lot. It did take away their freedom, but you will find a substantial number of people who will say that it was actually a good thing in the end, and an equally substantial number of people who say that it wasn't."

Liz's first novel, *The Ghost Sister*, was published by Bantam Spectra in 2001. In some ways, it dealt with similar themes to *Empire of Bones*.

"*The Ghost Sister* had an extraordinarily long genesis. Certainly the world and the characters were in my head when I was about 14, which not coincidentally was when I first started reading science fiction, and even less coincidentally was when I started reading Jack Vance, who really did inspire me to become an sf writer."

Which books of Vance's inspired her in particular?

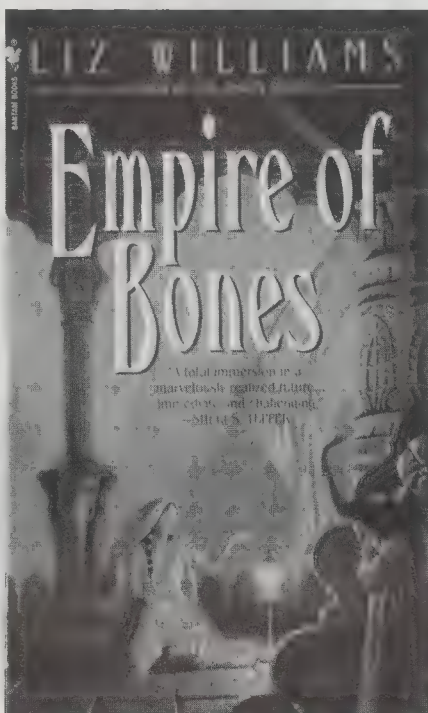
"The four 'Planet of Adventure' novels. They're about the adventures of an astronaut from Earth who crashes on a very varied planet, and gets caught up with a number of alien rulers, who are in turn colonizing bits of it. It's concerned with his adventures and his attempts to find a ship to take him home, so in a way it's a fairly standard plot, but it was astonishingly inventive, and a rich and varied world. I read that and thought – ahhh!"

"*Ghost Sister* was nominated for the Philip K Dick Award, and during that weekend I finally got to tell Jack Vance in person that he was the one who inspired me. To which he replied 'That's the kinda thing they oughtta put me in jail for!'

"Although I didn't start writing properly until I was in my late 20s, I started world-building much earlier, making notes, starting stories and not finishing them, and drawing maps, one of which is the map at the start of *The Ghost Sister*."

So the map was around longer than the novel?

"The map's always the first thing," she acknowledges. "I just like drawing maps! A serious first draft of the novel was begun about 1996. It was the year



we moved to Kazakhstan, so I did some of it before I went, and the rest when I came back. It was written over a period of about three to four years, in between writing other stuff."

Was that short stories?

"Short stories and also a couple of Chinese supernatural detective novels, which haven't been published yet, but are set in the same world as some of the *Interzone* stories of mine – Singapore Three. They're fun, but they're basically pulp fiction."

Would she want to publish those eventually?

"Yes, I'm desperate to publish them, but I'm being marketed as a more serious writer, much to my chagrin!"

Perhaps she should use a pseudonym!

"Yes, I might think about that, but the trouble is I'm so attached to the brand name now, that I'm not sure whether that's possible, but I will get them published at some point."

The Ghost Sister is set on an alien planet, Monde D'Isle, but it's also about the arrival of people from a very different culture. What motivated her to write the novel?

"Initially, the humans proper didn't appear at all, and it was purely about the Mondhaith, then I needed a counterpoint, and I became aware that I needed an outsider to see them. A lot of what they were going through wasn't really explained, because people don't explain their own nature to themselves that much. They don't generally sit around having long, philosophical discussions about their own weirdnesses. They try to deal with their natures, but in that kind of society they're concerned mainly with the business of survival. The Gaians were brought in as kind of an outside eye."

But the Gaians end up driving the whole plot.

"Yes, they do. It was a different plot, initially. I had a story, but I didn't have a plot. Story and plot are very different things. When somebody said that to me, I didn't understand it, and now I do understand. Plot is about the nuts-and-bolts and the logic, whereas story relates to emotional attachment – you don't really care how they get from A to B, you just desperately want them to do it, whereas with plot you've actually got to sit down and explain the mechanics. Story is really about emotional engagements, whereas plot is about logic."

In the story, the Mondhaith society has been artificially created some time in the past.

"This again is about colonization, really, except that these people were themselves just colonists; there was nobody to colonize. But instead of somebody coming in and changing them, they changed themselves, and they were complicit in that change; and

because of that complicity, they have to bear the responsibility for what they've become."

They seem, however, to have forgotten their origins.

"They have. They've been there a long time. They're a bit amnesiac, anyway, poor bastards."

One of the key features of the Mondhaith is their periodical reversion to animal-like ferocity, a state called the bloodtide. There are lots of romantic ideas about getting closer to nature, and bloodtide seems to allow this, but it's not romantic at all!

"No, it's ambiguous because I think there are a lot of books – vampire novels especially – that do romanticize the 'dark side of nature,' and it's almost a kind of Nietzschean idea that eventually, in its original form, went on to inspire a lot of fascism. Certainly among the Nazi party, getting back to nature was an absolutely ideal thing. There is a fascistic side to the Green movement, and I say this as a paid-up member of Friends of the Earth. I'm very sympathetic to Green politics and the environmental movement, but there is certainly a dark side to it, and this is part of that."

"Werewolf novels tend to bring out the horror a bit more, the nasty, gory, bloody side of it, and this is really a werewolf novel, it's just that the Mondhaith don't physically change, they psychologically change."

The Gaians have a very clean, ordered world, but they also have a High Priestess who's a leader in a goddess-worshipping religion. The Gaians are horrified when a child gets killed by some adult Mondhaith during their bloodtide. This encounter prompts Dia to close down the "morphic field" facility she sees as responsible for producing the Mondhaith's behaviour.

"I was thinking of the modern pagan movement, and the New Age movement. I'd like to make a distinction between New Age and Paganism. New Age is very much about peace and love and light, and Pagans do, generally, have a much clearer idea of what nature actually is and is about. They tend, quite a lot of the time, not to sentimentalize it, but there is certainly a strand in the pagan movement, and a strand in the Green movement as well, which says that the Earth is totally our responsibility and we're altering it drastically and we have to do something about it; we have to *save the world*. When you look at what the Earth has actually been through in terms of climate change, what we're doing to it is pretty much a minor blip; if you look at huge volcanic eruptions, they are far worse than anything we could do to the ozone layer. This isn't to say that we should carry on going as we are going, or we'll end in disaster for us and for

any species unfortunate enough to share the planet with us, but we're not going to damage the Earth particularly – it's a planet."

There seems to be elements of this kind of gynocentric attitude in Dia.

"Yes, she's extremely authoritarian, and there are a lot of people in the pagan movement who are extremely authoritarian. They pretend they're not, but they are."

Another Gaian, the quantum anthropologist Shu Gho, comes into conflict with Dia. Was she supposed to be the expedition's conscience?

"Shu Gho's not really associated with them at all, she's just along for the ride. She is the conscience to some extent, but she's also the ordinary person who thinks about things rather than having an ideological investment in them. We all have agendas, but most of us are amenable to reason, and to seeing the disadvantages of our agenda, whereas there are a number of people who will just force the agenda through, regardless, and don't really want to listen to counter-indications of that. They're fanatics, basically, and they're found in all sorts of areas. The fact that Dia's into a soft, goddess-worshipping religion doesn't make her any less of a fanatic, and doesn't make her any less dangerous."

But Paganism is currently a minority religion.

"Yes, but it isn't in this novel, and this is the way it could go. The Christian majority certainly did put a lot of people through a lot of grief – pretty much all major religions have done. Paganism, if it becomes a major religion, will do exactly the same, if people are allowed to get away with it. This is not to say that I'm anti-pagan, because I'm not. This is my religion, for what it's worth."

Despite having a goddess worshipping religion, haven't the Gaians lost something the Mondhaith haven't?

"The Gaians think that they can control everything, and when you think you can control everything, it has an unfortunate effect on you when you discover that you can't. Whereas the Mondhaith know that they are at the mercy of something that's much bigger than themselves, and so they have a humility which the Gaians don't have any more, because they're used to having the upper hand all the time."

Mondhaith society would seem very strange to us. Children are thrown out into the wilderness, where they either die or return at adolescence. On the other hand, it seems quite a stable society.

Liz acknowledges this, but adds: "It's conservative because it's so much in thrall to its biology."

One of the things that interested me, despite or, partly because it wasn't emphasized, was that the main character was bisexual.

"Yes, they're all bisexual, which really came out of a lack of a firm distinction in gender differences. This comes about again because of the biology, because the women don't have to bring up kids. Their role is not as clearly defined as it is in a society which is maternal, because in societies of that level of medieval development, women end up looking after the kids most of the time, so their role is conditioned by their biological and social expectations. The Mondhaith don't have that."

So it seems that although Liz doesn't claim to be a "hard" sf writer in terms of nuts-and-bolts engineering, her sf is hard in sociological terms.

"It is in a sociological sense, yes," she agrees, "or I would like to think it is – but I'll probably have a host of sociologists disagree with me. With the bisexuality, I didn't want to make it a central feature, because in quite a lot of novels, homosexuality is a central feature and I just wanted us to get to the point where it is a normal thing, it's taken for granted. It's not a big deal with these people, so why should it be a big deal for us in the novel?"

One reviewer reacted to it as a "politically correct" novel.

"Somebody did see it as politically correct, and had a very strong reaction to it in those terms. 'Political correctness' is a particular bugbear of mine because it's a very lazy criticism, it doesn't really mean anything. The Right has its own form of political correctness, in terms of the language it uses. It talks about 'common sense,' 'human nature,' 'free markets,' all these terms which it never examines, because it's too lazy to examine them, and then it accuses the left of being 'PC' if the left comes up with anything that it dislikes. I don't mind being accused of being a Marxist or a feminist, for example, but I would like critics to take what I write seriously enough not to slap lazy indicators onto it!"

The novel itself could be taken to be saying something like that.

"I think the novel is highly critical of people who don't think hard enough about what they're doing. Quite a lot of the time, if you have an all-female crew, someone will get up on their hind legs and say, oh, it's politically correct. But as a criticism, that doesn't mean anything."

But no one objects if there's an all-male crew, which have been a staple in science fiction for a long time!

"It's not logical. When people use terms like political correctness, they're coming from an emotional standpoint, not from a logical standpoint, and it does annoy me, I have to say."

In fact, there's a bit where

Shu Gho is thinking about things and she rejects absolutist ways of thinking: *she says it's antique, and that we should put it behind us.*

"Yes. *Empire of Bones* is about taking that argument on, to looking at relativism. I don't think I've got very far with any of these explorations, by the way, epistemologically, but... I'm trying!"

One of the most fascinating sequences in the novel is when the Gaians go along to a Mondhaith funeral, and they are interpreted as ghosts and as a consequence, mostly ignored. Was Liz saying that cultures will account for unexplained occurrences in their own terms?

"Generally, yes. In this sense they see them as ghosts because they lack a particular sense, a particular quality, and so, in a certain sense, they're not quite real. Mevennen herself is seen as a ghost, as a not-quite human person, in a way that the disabled are often seen – people talking above them as if they're not quite there, the 'does she take sugar?' kind of attitude."

The Ghost Sister ends with this big "morphic field" generator being turned off, and it turns out that there are lots of little generators already present to take over its job.

"Which is basically a kind of metaphor for knowledge, their capacity to understand themselves, in a certain sense."

So in a sense, she's saying that the Mondhaith have a greater self-knowl-

edge than the Gaians?

"They do acquire it, but it's something that they have to suffer to acquire..."

A lot of the things which are introduced in the novel, like "ley lines" and "morphic fields," are concepts used by the New Age movement as literal metaphors for getting back to nature. Was Liz afraid, perhaps, of being a little too literalistic in her use of such metaphors?

"Yes, probably. I needed to have some kind of quasi-science, and it seemed to fit because of the ideas of centres of knowledge, dissemination of knowledge..."

So knowledge is another key theme in her writing?

"Yes, because that was my profession, for a long time; I was a philosophy graduate. My field was epistemology, which is the theory and study of knowledge, and so I carry that over. I don't think I carry it over in a particularly vigorous way, but I do carry it over."

A lot of sf authors take things like scientific knowledge for granted...

"They may do now, they used not to. I think that really good science fiction is about looking at how we know things, why we think we know things, as well as what do we know and why do we believe."

In some senses, she seems to be using her fiction to ask these questions herself.

"Yes," she says, "I like playing with ideas..."

So these themes are by no means exhausted?

"The novel I'm doing now, which is set in central Asia, is all about knowledge, and about belief, and all about faith, and again that's a continuation of why people believe what they believe, and what the end result of those beliefs might be. It's also about dreams of a Soviet empire, dreams of a scientific future, and I think that sf ought to be looking at that sort of thing, because it deals with the future. It's a faith-based writing in the sense that rather than looking at what happens when we get to heaven we're looking at what happens when we get to the future. It's an interesting thing; I certainly feel that with Russia. I certainly think the Soviet Union replaced heaven with the future."

Was she influenced by any Russian writers?

"No, not when I was writing *The Ghost Sister*, but I subsequently have been influenced by people like Chinghiz Aitmatov. He's a Kyrgyz writer, and he's interesting on the subject of belief. I'm looking a lot at the Soviet space programme at the moment."

So is the next book about the Russian space programme?

"It's about somebody who's

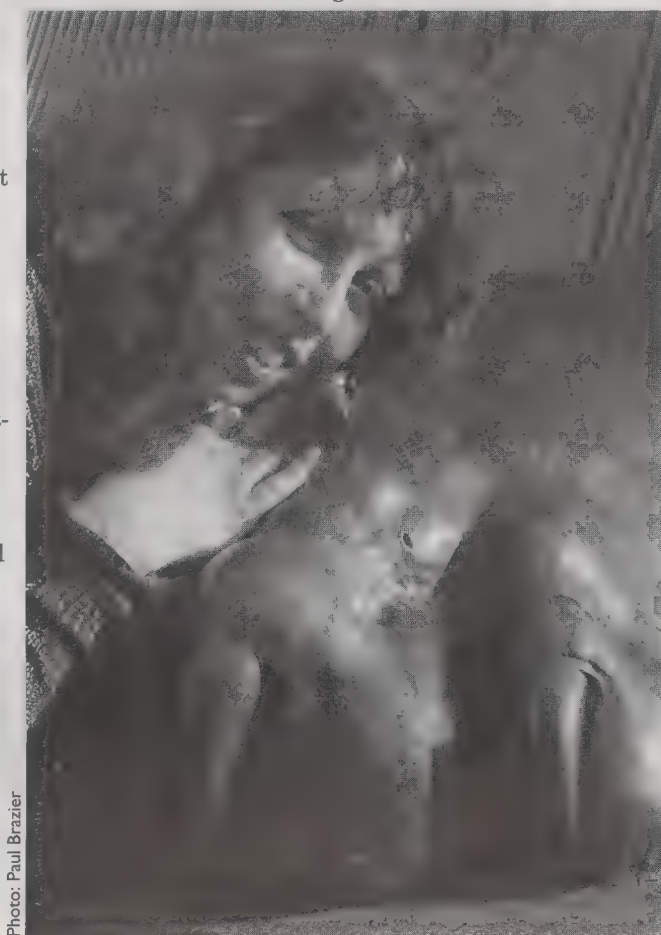


Photo: Paul Brazier

involved with the space programme – a female astrophysicist, who has since been murdered. I met a lot of female Russian astrophysicists whom I know. She's cleaning floors for a living, and she meets a man who claims to be an 800-year-old Russian hero. They find a place that seems to be a kind of parallel Russia, a secret republic..."

Liz seems to be very daring in her attempts to go beyond her own experience in her writing.

"Yes, I think I take horrible liberties, because you can't go that far beyond your own experience, you can only base it on people you know, what people have told you. I lived in the former Soviet Union, and spent a lot of time talking to people about what they thought and felt. It's trying to get inside somebody else's skin, but you never can do that exactly, and it's arrogant to think that you can. At the same time, I'm not going to limit myself to my own experience, because it's not extensive enough to say what I'm trying to say. I'm a fiction writer. I'm not going to write stories about 'my Aga hell,' or the intricacies of my menstrual cycle, because that's what most fiction writers seem to do these days – outside the genre, at least. I just find it so tedious. I don't believe in *write what you know*. I believe in trying to find out about something and then writing about that, using your imagination."

Alongside her novels, Liz has published a number of short stories. In the UK, she's had pieces in *Interzone* and *The Third Alternative*, and in the US in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, in *Realms of Fantasy* and in *Cicada*. How did she start writing short stories?

"I can't remember how I started writing them, I just did! I wrote 'Voivodoi,' and I wrote another story that was set in a Chinese universe. I'm not sure what started me writing shorts, it was just that I had ideas that I needed to explore and have fun with, and to give me a break from writing novels."

So her short stories have been supplementary to the novel writing?

"Yes, they have, but I like writing short stories, I find it quite satisfying, and, in a way, I find it difficult, as well..."

Several of her short stories are fantasy. Would she like to do a fantasy novel?

"I would, yes. I think I write science fantasy. Okay, it's set on other planets, but I think there is a mix of mythology in there, that could, also, go into a fantasy novel. I'm not too good at categorizing what I do, and I don't really like being categorized. I think some of my favourite authors aren't categorizable in that sense. Graham Joyce is very hard to define, I think his work is excellent."

How long has she been reading these authors?

"I've been reading science fiction since I was about eleven or twelve; I'm 37 now, so it's about 25 or 26 years."

One of her other favourite authors is Tanith Lee. What particularly appealed to Liz about Tanith's writing?

"First of all, her use of language, which I think is fantastic. I think she's an extraordinary writer. I get very hooked on people's prose style – it's why I like Le Guin."

So the prose style's very important. Has that fed back into Liz's own work?

"Yes, I am a strong stylist, by which I mean that I pay a lot of attention to it, more attention to it than I do to things like plot and story. I've had to pay more attention to those, but I'm predominantly a stylist, I think."

Concentration on style seems to have been neglected by some in recent years, and a lot of authors end up sounding very similar. Liz does have a distinctive prose style.

"I aim for a distinct prose style. I can't really write in any other way than the way that I write, but I do try to refine it and hone it, because I do think it's important. I sometimes think British authors tend to be 'all style and no content,' as the cliché goes, and the Americans are the other way round, but when

I think of people like Ray Bradbury who manage to do both, I don't see why you shouldn't do both, they're not mutually incompatible. I think some people are stronger on one than the other, and I'm definitely stronger on the style."

Her stories do get into the "Best of..." anthologies, and one of the Chinese ones – "Adventures in the Ghost Trade" – was nominated for a BSFA award. This was a detective story.

"I like detective fiction as well, and I like horror, and I don't see why I can't have everything. I'm very into having my cake and eating it in a literary dimension, which isn't necessarily very helpful to publishers!"

Her first published story was "Voivodoi," which came out in the small-press magazine *Terra Incognita* and was subsequently republished in *Cicada*. Would she like to do a short-story collection?

"I'd love to and I have all the titles lined up, ready to go if anybody's interested. I have made some approaches, though not to my own publishers. I might end up bringing it out myself, or something. I love collections, but the publishers don't because they say they don't sell. They don't sell because the publishers don't market them properly, in my opinion, but there we are..."

So what are her plans for the future?

"To get more novels out. The one that I'm working on at the moment is taking up a lot of time and energy, and I'm not really looking beyond that, but I have got more plans for novels."

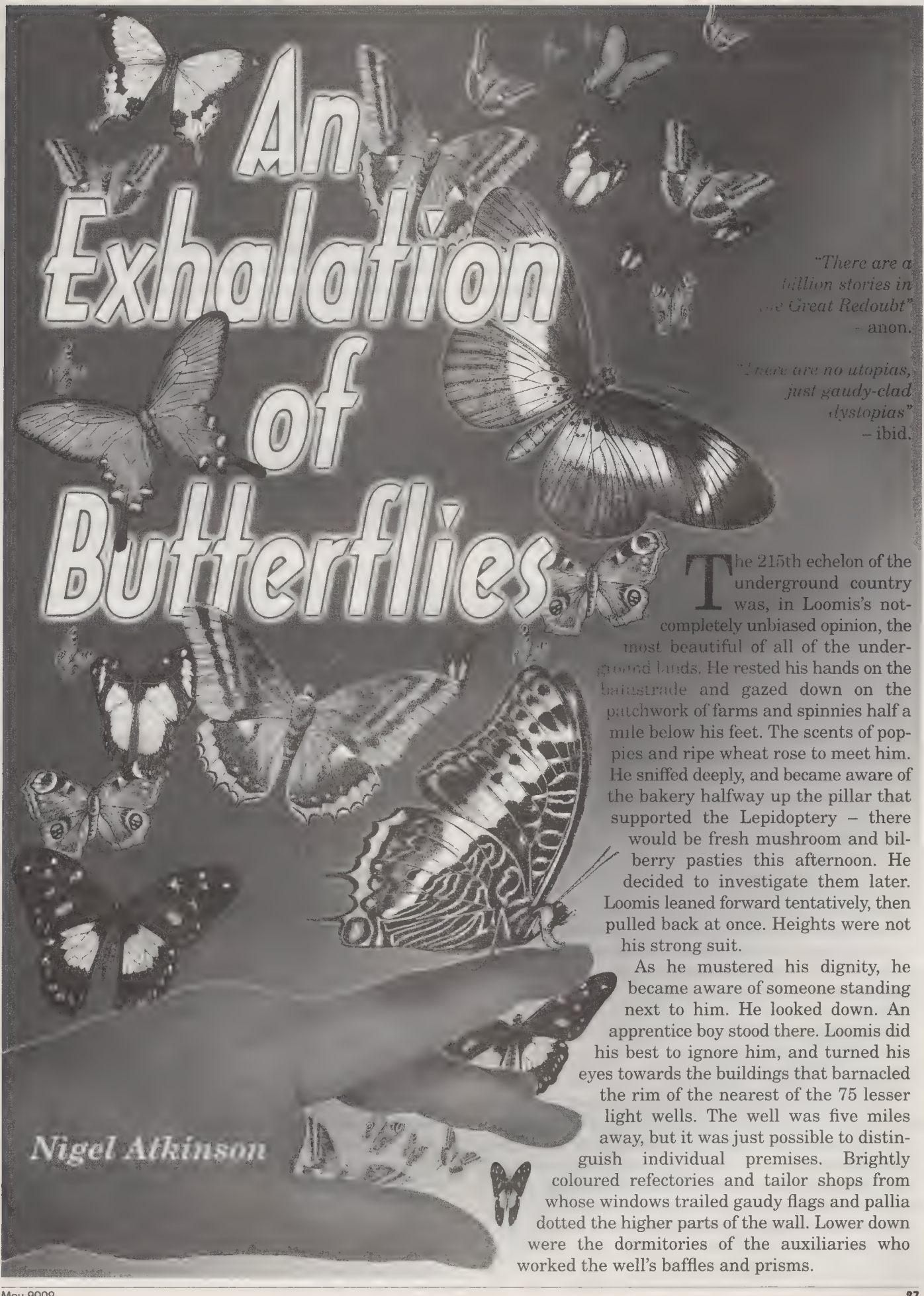
And finally, is it true that she trained as a card sharp?

"No! I have a book on card-sharping, which I was very interested in at one point. It is true that I worked as a Tarot reader" – on Brighton Pier – "and that was a great job. The card-sharp book was written by a riverboat gambler, who was also a clergyman in the late 19th century, so if the writing fails, I may yet have a profession to turn back on!"

Let's hope that doesn't happen. 12



Photos: Paul Brazier



An Exhalation of Butterflies

Nigel Atkinson

*"There are a
billion stories in
the Great Redoubt"*
- anon.

*"There are no utopias,
just gaudy-clad
dystopias"*
- ibid.

The 215th echelon of the underground country was, in Loomis's not-completely unbiased opinion, the most beautiful of all of the underground lands. He rested his hands on the balustrade and gazed down on the patchwork of farms and spinnies half a mile below his feet. The scents of poppies and ripe wheat rose to meet him. He sniffed deeply, and became aware of the bakery halfway up the pillar that supported the Lepidoptery – there would be fresh mushroom and bilberry pasties this afternoon. He decided to investigate them later. Loomis leaned forward tentatively, then pulled back at once. Heights were not his strong suit.

As he mustered his dignity, he became aware of someone standing next to him. He looked down. An apprentice boy stood there. Loomis did his best to ignore him, and turned his eyes towards the buildings that barnacled the rim of the nearest of the 75 lesser light wells. The well was five miles away, but it was just possible to distinguish individual premises. Brightly coloured refectories and tailor shops from whose windows trailed gaudy flags and pallia dotted the higher parts of the wall. Lower down were the dormitories of the auxiliaries who worked the well's baffles and prisms.

Loomis's eyes turned to the waterfall of light pouring down the well. Today, it seemed to him that the scintilla of the Earth Force was rising from the well. That was a common optical illusion. The intellect knew that the light was cascading down from the Earth Current-kindled luminary a hundred miles above, but sometimes the eye chose to disagree.

Loomis glanced to his side; the boy was still there.

He adopted his most imposing stance. "What do you want, lad?"

"How old are you, Master?" the boy asked. Loomis leaned on his pollen broom and brushed away the clump of Red Admirals that were dancing on his pollen-stained brow. He attempted to pierce the boy with a flinty look. It seemed to have little effect. *The youth of today*, he thought; *in my day we had respect for our elders.*

"I'm exactly the right age I should be, Apprentice."

The boy persisted. "And what's that?"

"Old enough to give you a clout, manling."

The boy shrugged. "And then will you tell me how old you are? They say you are a thousand years old – at least!"

The lad's ear was a tempting target. But for once Loomis didn't have the heart. In truth, he was quite amused by his determination. Not that he would admit that, of course; curiosity was all right in its place, but too much of it always led to trouble. He could vouch for that. But he still had some sense of duty left. The mysteries of the Lepidoptery were only part of what masters must teach the apprentices. Due deference and a respect for the natural order were also important, if less academically demanding.

Loomis nodded towards the clump of apprentices who were circling round Mistress Melrig at few dozen yards further along the gallery. "I'm old enough to wonder why you aren't attending to your studies with the good mistress yonder." The boy bit his lip and discovered something fascinating about his bare feet. He wriggled his toes in the thin layer of discarded scales that covered every surface in the gallery. Loomis wondered whether he was trying to taste the floor with his feet. Many a young apprentice tried that trick, after the mystery of where their charges' tasting organs were had been revealed to them, but the boy seemed to old for that particular silliness.

Loomis estimated that he was about twelve years old, almost old enough to take his name. Almost as old as his son had been... Putting the old wound aside, he turned his attention back to the boy.

"Well?"

He shuffled his feet. "She's, y'know."

"Enlighten me."

"A bit, um, dull."

Loomis wrinkled his brow and peered over his nose pouches at the boy. He tended to agree with the apprentice's assessment of Mistress Melrig. As far as Loomis was concerned she was the worst fusspot in Wrangwysh Toft Lepidoptery, and quite possibly in the entire Great Redoubt. *She's probably boring her poor students half to death*, he thought. But, all that said, she was a sister of the guild, and it would not be seemly to allow such criticism to pass unscathed.

Loomis's hand was fast enough to pluck a butterfly from its darting, twisting, unpredictable path, so the boy never had a chance of avoiding the retribution that came to him in a blur of precise motion.

"Ow!" The lad exclaimed as he reached to comfort a painfully twisted earlobe. "That hurt!"

"Consider yourself lucky. I'm in a benevolent mood, otherwise I'd have pulled your ear right off." From the look on the boy's face, Loomis guessed that the lad's definition of benevolent was different to his. "Did you think that was unfair?"

The boy took several seconds to answer, his freckled face twisting as it echoed the battle going on in his mind. Eventually, he decided on discretion rather than continued defiance.

"No master, it was fair. I'm sorry."

"Good. Now come, sit with me in yon arbour," Loomis said, gesturing towards a roughly cut wooded bench nestling in under a sheltering willow tree. Master and apprentice both sat down. Loomis wondered why he was bothering letting this fidgety, undisciplined, unnamed apprentice take up his valuable time. Not that he was exactly what you might call busy. Alone among the Elders of Wrangwysh Toft, he did not have to spend part of his time teaching. He was a peripatetic, in theory anyway. More often he was just ignored by the apprentices, which suited him. On an impulse he handed his pollen broom to the lad, whose eyes formed amazed saucers almost as wide as his gaping mouth.

"Hold onto this for a minute," he said gently.

"I'll be careful Master," the boy said in a hushed tone. Loomis noticed that he had stopped fidgeting, so concerned was he with his burden. The broom was actually pretty durable. Loomis had used it for several decades without getting as much as a scratch on the iron-hard ebony of its ten-foot long shaft, nor causing any damage to its subtle gears and mechanisms. Nevertheless, it was very unusual for an apprentice to be trusted to hold a broom. So unusual in fact, that at least half of Mistress Melrig's class was now paying more attention to what was going on in the arbour than to their increasingly testy teacher. She hadn't noticed the reason for her charges' inattention, and was dashing, as best a dumpy, not-very-young woman could, around the group, shouting and slapping at heads.

Loomis ignored the increasing mayhem. It was amusing, very amusing actually, but he had a job to do. He held his left hand out in front of his face; palm down and with his index finger raised six inches above his hand. After a few seconds a black and orange butterfly alighted on his elevated finger. He presented his right palm to the insect. His fingers ran quickly through a complex series of shapes that were augmented by the bright colours tattooed on his palm. The butterfly froze. Loomis turned to the boy.

"Species?" he asked.

"That's a viceroy," the boy replied confidently. "*Basilarchia archippus*."

Loomis wrinkled his brow. "Are you sure? Looks like a monarch to me."

"Of course its isn't! Look there's a black streak on its hind wing. Crosses from top to bottom. Monarchs don't have one."

"Well, yes. But that was an easy one. How's your nose?"

The boy shrugged. Loomis thought that was a sensible answer. Olfactory skills were the hardest to acquire, and among the most important. No apprentice with a grain of sense would boast about his or her nasal skills. It was way too easy to come unstuck. Loomis decided it was worth a test. With great delicacy and precision, he ran his little finger down the paralysed butterfly's abdomen. It came away carrying the merest trace of pollen, bound by a tiny amount of nectar. He sniffed it, then held his finger out. The lad leaned forward and inhaled deeply. His forehead tightened in concentration and his nasal pouches ballooned up as he sniffed deep and long.

Without intending to, Loomis found himself examining the boy's eyes for traces of red, his nose for signs of irritation. Every year it seemed that more apprentices were lost to the pollen allergy, like the bright-eyed boy who had been the joy of his life.

"A lantana of some sort, Master, I think."

Loomis smiled, the arbour was dotted with the flamboyant red-and-yellow spiked flowers. "Which one? Purple or orange?"

The boy sniffed again. "Orange?"

"Good guess, but wrong. Purple."

"How do you know that? They always smell the same to me."

"Me too." Loomis took a span to enjoy the mixture of surprise and bafflement playing out on the boy's face. He held his finger up. "Look. The pollen of the purple variety is slightly more yellow-red than that of the orange. Of course, if you had been attending to Mistress Melrig's botany lessons you might have known that already."

The boy looked suitably chastened. Loomis couldn't help but break into a smile, then a thin peal of laughter. The boy joined, in and soon most of the botany class were looking in puzzlement at them. Mistress Melrig had finally noticed the source of the disturbance, and was standing with hands on her ample hips, gazing balefully and wagging a finger at Loomis. He waved back cheerily. With a flick of her severely cut, straight black hair, she began to march towards him. Her class trailed eagerly after her.

"Oh no," Loomis groaned. But he was spared a show-down with Mistress Melrig. She had barely taken ten paces when the sound of a great gong echoed down the hourducts. Everyone froze in surprise. There was at least a thirdhour until the next scheduled sending, and they were not usually announced so clamorously. Clearly something was up.

With a circular motion of his talking hand Loomis dismissed the transfixed butterfly. Then he stood up and, after retrieving his pollen broom, headed for the balustrade.

Knotting his courage, he peered over the edge. On a roadway below a clump of startled hour criers were scurrying towards the nearest hourduct. Their black-and-white coats trailed long scarves, which twisted in the

draught of their breakneck passage. The last one in line tripped over a trailing scarf, and tumbled headlong, much to the amusement of the watching gaggle of apprentices. He was quickly on his feet and chasing after his fellows while rubbing a bruised head. By the time the criers reached the hourduct, their minions were arriving and beginning the slow, difficult process of organizing themselves. Fifty undercriers formed the van, and behind each of them snaked a line of a 25 under-undercriers. Milling around behind them like competitors in a mad relay race were thousands of under-under-undercriers.

Loomis shook his head in mock dismay. The news criers were never the best regulated guild, and this urgent summons had wrought entertaining havoc among them.

"Master?"

"Yes, boy, what is it now?"

"Master, is it true that once the news passed through the Great Redoubt on the wings of the Earth Current? And there was no need for the criers, for all of humanity's uncounted billions could read it themselves?"

"What an absurd notion!" Mistress Melrig snapped. "What on the black Earth have you been putting into the lad's empty head?"

Loomis shrugged. "Nothing I said." He felt an urgent need to change the subject. "Look now, the hour slip has arrived."

The chief news crier, a bony etiolated man called Redeheid, emerged from the hourduct clutching a sheet of yellow paper. His immediate underlings clustered close to him, their pens scribbling furiously as he recited the text to them. As soon as the cry was done, the criers spread out. In seconds they were surrounded by constellations of undercriers. The next order of magnitude of pens descended to paper. When they had the bulletin down they sprinted headlong away from the *melée*, each desperately seeking room for their own tiny solar systems of under-undercriers. Once again papers were inscribed, hopefully with the accuracy and precision that was the otherwise dubious guild's proudest boast. Then, the lowest echelon of the criers' guild spread out in the four canonical directions, and all points in-between.

Loomis leaned back on the balustrade. Before long an under-undercrier came scurrying past. The Lepidopterist's arm blurred out and snatched the paper from the man's hand. The under-undercrier stamped his foot and his face reddened with indignation, but there was little he could do to challenge someone of Loomis's high rank. The lepidopterist carefully read the hour slip then returned it to the infuriated man, who promptly fled.

Mistress Melrig snorted at his departing back. "He might have at least told us what the substance of the hour slip was." She turned towards Loomis. "Well?"

Loomis took up his lecturing pose, chin up, hands grasping his robe's collar. "There is to be an Exhalation."

A babble of excited apprentices' voices rose at this news. The last Exhalation had been 356 years ago, and there wasn't expected to be another one for at least a hundred years. It would be like ten years' worth of the festival for the raising of the Wall of Safety, all rolled into one ecstatic day. And it would be a lot of work. A *devil of*

a lot of work, Loomis thought, gloomily.

"When?" Mistress Melrig asked pointedly.

"Five years from this day."

"You jest."

"No. Five years."

Sarcasm dripped from Mistress Melrig's lips. "By the Days of Light, our guild barely numbers five million. How can we be expected to raise an Exhalation in five years? And why? Have the watchers been dismissed? Has the sun re-lit? Has Loomis found honest work?"

Loomis shrugged. He was stunned by the prospect. A mere five years – it was impossible. They would have to raise as many apprentices as possible, as soon as possible, aye and recruit millions of labourers. Then there was the co-ordination with thousands of other guild houses on hundreds of echelons and through the Great Pyramid. His head swam.

"So," Mistress Melrig insisted. "What's the big news?"

"There is to be a new Master Monstruwacan," he said simply.

Everyone's head turned upwards, as though, by dint of stunned curiosity, they could peer through the hundreds of echelons above, past the actinic detonation of the Earth Current-driven generators, onward through the 1,320 floors of the pyramid, to the Tower of Observation at the apex. Silence fell over apprentices and elders. There had not been a new Master Monstruwacan for time out of mind, at least the mind of the lesser mortals of the Great Redoubt. The more senior Monstruwacans would know, but they rarely descended below the surface...

... Except for Exhalations. Loomis's heart leapt with hope. He would ask one of them; they surely would know what had happened to his son. All he had to do was wait five years. Then he would have his chance.

Five years passed like the wind rustling through the lungs of the Great Redoubt. The Guild of Lepidopterists grew to seven million strong, but still remained one of the smallest of the underground guilds. Five years of endless labour, convoluted planning and desperate racing against time. It was impossible to guess how many caterpillars were raised, pupated and frozen to wait for the great day. But in the first two years, the effort came close to ruining the Great Redoubt's fecund farmlands. Caterpillars were everywhere. On the 57th echelon every plant was gnawed down to a nub. Even where they were under more control, everything seemed to be covered with twitching, gliding blobs of colour, forever seeking their first and last meal. Special precautions had to be taken to protect infants from suffocation, or poisoning by the many lethal varieties infesting the underlands.

Eventually, and to the great humiliation of the Lepidopterists' Guild, the Monstruwacan Council decreed a six-month hiatus to bring the situation under control. Amid ridicule from the other guilds, the Lepidopterists regained their poise. The next great hatching was much better controlled, and the Monstruwacan Council again smiled on the butterfly farmers.

And so it went on, until hundreds of billions (some said upwards of a trillion) pupae were stored in vast, cooled

galleries on each of the underground country's 306 echelons. A year before the Exhalation, the Guild of Windmasters spread throughout the Great Redoubt, mapping the subtleties of wind-flow through both underground country and the Great Redoubt. Loomis was far from being the only Greybeard who noted quietly that the two halves of the Great Redoubt, despite the claims of legend, did share the same set of lungs.

Finally, the great day dawned. As one of the elders of his guild, Loomis was offered the chance of watching the Exhalation from the lowest tier. The offer was tempting; it was decades since he had stood amidst the 306 fields. There would be unbounded opulence on the lowest tier, the fields would be flowing with food and drink, and garlanded with millions of flowers, their scent as intoxicating as vintage Goldale wine. It would also be the best place to see the display; fully half of the butterflies would be released from the lowest tier. But Loomis had chosen to stay in his home, its 215 fields seeming more comfortable. He also felt that he had a better chance of meeting a Monstruwacan up there.

Loomis was one of the first people on his echelon to feel the Exhalation beginning. He was standing on an ornate spiral stairway, midway up the North curve of the outer wall. Through his bare feet, he felt a subtle change in the normal vibrational timbre of the Redoubt's naked metal. The spectators chattering excitedly around him were unaware of the change at first, but then the amplitude began to mount. At first, there was only a single, pure tone, like a million voices in wordless, joyful unison. Then understated overtones manifested as harmonic variations on the ecstatic main theme. Loomis glanced towards the roof of the echelon. Six dozen great silk flags, each handled by a hundred hauliers, waited for the call to action. Loomis felt a pang of worry. He put it aside – whatever happened, his work was done.

He looked down at the millions milling around below. They were clad in colourful garb, and garlanded with bright flowers. They were a happy chaos of colour and joy, but Loomis was looking for something else. He opened his mind, then waited. As the butterfly armadas raced upwards, gentle breezes began to play through the echelon. From every metal branch, and bronchus and bronchiole of the underground country's lungs; from every hour tube; and from every balloon highway, soft, sweet-scented zephyrs played. His mind continued its search.

Then, someone touched Loomis's mind with a clarity that made even his weak mental voice sing in harmony. He started to descend the stair, searching for the Monstruwacan. As Loomis reached the floor level of the echelon, the first butterflies erupted from the mile-wide central light well. They were too far away for him to distinguish individual insects, but he knew that the almost solid-looking column of flashing green, white and black was made up from uncountable four- and five-barred swallowtails. It had been deemed fitting that the first defiant challenge to the Night should come from the Aristeus, named as they were for an ancient, long-dead sun god.

The column rose with majestic slowness, its homo-

geneity defying the chaotic flight patterns of its myriad members. High above, the great silk flags unfurled. As they measured their several-hundred-yard lengths, butterflies rose from 10,000 cages. Close by Loomis, legions of Birdwings, Pine Whites and Pelidne Sulphurs formed arpeggios to the great chord ascending the central light well. All around the echelon, innumerable minuscule specks of the Master Word were freed to ascend the lesser light wells. Their passing created a coruscation of winds, tousling the spectators' hair and whipping at their clothing. Ill-secured hats and scarves were grasped and thrown upwards never to return. Their former owners cheered their losses until they were hoarse.

His professional pride satisfied, Loomis sought the Monstruwacan. He found him standing a few dozen yards to the North. He was an imposing figure: fully a head taller than the tallest normal man, and exuding an almost palpable air of authority. Despite the crush, there was a little empty zone around him, emphasizing how reluctant people were to approach him.

Loomis's mouth suddenly felt dry. He took a deep breath and stepped forward. "Master," he said respectfully. "I would crave a word with you."

The Monstruwacan tilted his head and looked down on him. To Loomis, it seemed that a searchlight had been turned on his soul. He had met Monstruwacans before, but this one had a power and clarity rare even among his caste.

"Ah, a Lepidopterist. How may I help you, child?"

"It is of a child I ask, Master," Loomis said carefully. "My child. A boy rejected by my guild when he was cursed by the allergy sickness and since lost to me."

The Monstruwacan spread his hands. "Why would I know of this boy? Surely when he left your guild another took him in."

"No, Master. He rejected the blandishments of the other guilds, claiming to want to seek his destiny in the Great Pyramid... and perhaps beyond."

"Beyond? That is unlikely; it's very rare for –" He paused, as if recalling a long-forgotten memory, then considered the Lepidopterist carefully. "Is your name Loomis?"

"Yes, Master! How did you know?"

The Monstruwacan's brow furrowed and he contemplated the great ritual in silence for several minutes. Loomis, caught in a fever of hope and fear, dared not speak, lest he cause some fatal upset. In the rafters of the echelon, the last of the upsurging armies of butterflies were rising out of sight, disappearing through the many holes in the roof. Many would continue to climb the light wells, accruing new celebrants as they ascended the remaining 214 echelons of the underground country. Fifty echelons below the lowest floor of the pyramid, cunning nuances of light and scent would thin the relentlessly ascending butterfly nations by guiding many into long, Möbius-looped corridors, or tightly wound passages describing logarithmic spirals where they would wait their turn. After the majestic central column of life had passed from Humanity's underground kingdom into the Great Pyramid, the waiting myriads would be gradually released to continue their journey.

"There was one," the Monstruwacan said eventually.

"A boy bearing the signs of your calling on his face. He begged to be allowed to study for our guild. We refused. He was too old and it was unprecedented for someone from the underground country to seek such a boon. We encouraged him to return home and seek happiness among his people. He refused and defiantly set out to visit each of the thousand cities. For ten years, he wandered the Great Pyramid, staying a week in one city, a few hours in another. In due course, his peregrination was done, and he stood outside the Great Observatory at the apex of our world.

"His persistence greatly impressed the Council of Monstruwacans. You should be proud."

A lump grew in Loomis's throat, and tears pricked at the corners of his eyes.

"We expected him to ask again for admittance. We sought soft words to mitigate his disappointment. However, he surprised us again. He asked permission to brave the Land."

Loomis felt his heart lurch. The Monstruwacan's face creased in sympathy. "He was of age, we had no grounds to deny his petition. Six weeks later your son – who was given the name Brere for his stout heart – set out in a party of 43 brave, foolish young men. Millions watched as they crossed the Grey Downs without incident, skirted the Dark Palace, then fought valiantly in crossing the Road Where the Silent Ones Walk."

Loomis felt a wave of peace encompass him. The Monstruwacan continued: "Then, as they approached the three Silver Fire Holes, a wave of blackness swept from the Thing that Nods and engulfed them. When it had passed, no trace of our valiant explorers was left behind."

An hour later, a group of sweepers found Loomis. He was kneeling in peaceful supplication, his face crusted with old tears. All around him were the bodies of millions of dead butterflies, the sad, inevitable fraction of the Exhalation that had failed to achieve their destiny. Their broken, exhausted bodies were continuing to filter down, and were already two hand-spans deep around the Lepidopterist.

High above, legions of butterflies swept through the thousand cities then burst out of the twelve hundred thousand embrasures of the Great Pyramid in a detonation of colour and motion. Actinic beams kindled by the Earth current and guided by cunning prisms and mirrors illuminated the circling flocks. The four hulking Watchers quailed, if only briefly, at humanity's defiant Exhalation. The insects swept around the pyramid in ever-widening circles. After a little under an hour they began, slowly, to die.

Night returned to the Earth.

Nigel Atkinson lives in the North-East of England, and the above is the first story of his to see print. It originally appeared electronically on Andy Robertson's and Nigel Brown's "Night Land" website (<http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/nightmap.html>) which is dedicated to William Hope Hodgson's strange far-future epic first published in 1912 – against which background Nigel Atkinson's story is set (as was Andy Robertson's novelette "The Eater": see IZ 175).

Geek Futurology Dept. "In 1975 Ed Roberts, the founder of MITS, a calculator company based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, put a microchip in a box with a screen and called his invention Altair, after a character in *Star Wars*." (John Cassidy, *dot.con*, 2002)

THE TRANSCENDENT TIGERS

Ray Bradbury had his name inscribed on the 2,193rd paving-stone star of the Hollywood Walk of Fame on 1 April. This mighty honour, accessible to those not famous enough for the Grauman's Chinese Theater forecourt, had previously gone to Lassie and Rin Tin Tin.

David Gemmell's fantasy *Stormrider* came with a Bantam UK publicity sheet which the author may possibly find deflating: "This is the eagerly awaited FINAL novel in the Rigante series." Their caps, not mine.

R.A. Lafferty (1914-2002), Irish-American author of offbeat, unclassifiable sf, fantasy and tall tales, died on 18 March after long illness. He was 87. As a baroque stylist, gleeful connoisseur of conspiracy theories, devotee of Native American culture, conservative Catholic (with a Chestertonian taste for paradox), reworker of old myths and coiner of new ones, Lafferty became a beloved cult figure in sf and was avidly taken up by small presses as his work grew ever more quirky, flamboyant and uncommercial. He won the 1973 short story Hugo for "Eurema's Dam" and was honoured with the World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1990. A genuine wild talent whose high spirals, blarney and madness hugely enriched our genre.

George Lucas is at the nasty end of a \$140 million libel suit following his attempt to suppress the film *Starballz*, "an explicit sex parody of outer space adventure movies." Lucas's claim that this misused *Star Wars* intellectual property was thrown out of court by a federal judge in January. The countersuit arises from a Lucas spokeswoman's remark implying that *Starballz* "is directed to children," outraging the adult pornographers at its production company Media Market Group...

Michael Moorcock had a vascular bypass operation in late March to fix the circulation problem that gave him gangrene in one foot. Failure would mean "I get the crutch and the parrot and five weeks in Bognor in the panto version of *Treasure Island*. So there's always a silver lining. And if I can get to keep the bits they cut off, I can make a fortune from my loonier fans by selling them on e-bay." The op suc-

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

ceeded, with only two toes lost, but to his disgust Mr Moorcock learned that "actually they don't let you keep the bits. [...] This wouldn't have happened in a free country."

Nick Webb, former Simon & Schuster MD, has moved to the wrong side of the tracks and become an author: he's writing the authorized biography of Douglas Adams for Headline. Journalist M. J. Simpson, hard at work on the unauthorized bio for Hodder & Stoughton, comments through gritted teeth: "I'm not worried. I publish before him and I know I'll have masses of information he won't have. Of course, he'll have about £60,000 that I won't have..." Who will be the victor in this deadly Adamsian tussle between Hodder Headline (owners of H&S) and, er, Hodder Headline?

Cherry Wilder (1930-2002), popular New Zealand-born sf author, died in hospital in Wellington, NZ, on 14 March; she was 71. Yvonne Rousseau wrote: "Anti-authoritarian, generous in her enthusiasms, exhilaratingly inventive, and magically fun to be with: Cherry is very sadly missed."

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Brighton Author Pulped! Bantam US had printed covers for Liz Williams's new novel *Empire of Bones*, starring "a 'freedom fighter' based not-very-loosely on India's Phoolan Devi"... and then noticed that the blurb incautiously described this heroine as a terrorist. In a fit of post-9/11 nervousness, all the covers were sent to the shredder. (The book appeared with a new, bowdlerized blurb on 28 March.)

Far Too Many Awards. *BSFA Award*. Novel: *Chasm City*, Alastair Reynolds. Short: "The Children of Winter," Eric Brown (*Interzone* 163). Non-

fiction: *Omegatropic*, Stephen Baxter. Cover Art: *Omegatropic* cover, Colin Odell. *Philip K. Dick* for best original US paperback: Richard Paul Russo's *Ship of Fools*... Oscars in "major" categories eluded the 13-times-nominated *Lord of the Rings*, as predicted by cynics; it won for make-up, musical score, visual effects and cinematography. The *Harry Potter* film scored zero out of three nominations. *Shrek* won as best animated feature. The new *Planet of the Apes* merely picked up a couple of "Golden Raspberry" anti-Oscars, as worst remake and for Charlton Heston as worst supporting actor. *Nebulas*, novel shortlist only: *The Quantum Rose*, Catherine Asaro; *Eternity's End*, Jeffrey A. Carver; *Mars Crossing*, Geoffrey A. Landis; *A Storm of Swords*, George R.R. Martin; *The Collapsium*, Wil McCarthy; *The Tower at Stony Wood*, Patricia A. McKillip; *Declare*, Tim Powers; *Passage*, Connie Willis... *Bram Stoker Award* novel shortlist: *From the Dust Returned*, Ray Bradbury; *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman; *The Lost*, Jack Ketchum; *Black House*, Stephen King & Peter Straub. Next, the Hugo shortlist...

Thog's Modern Astronomy Masterclass. "...there is not the slightest bit of evidence that even a single planet exists in any other star system." (John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies*, 1975, updated 1991, 2002)

As Others See Us. Andy Sawyer of the SF Foundation scoured the gutters of *TV Times* to learn that "Dawn French is starring in a BBC 'comedy drama,' *Ted and Alice*, about a woman whose new boyfriend turns out to be an alien. According to the interview, Ms French doesn't go for stories about aliens, which are 'boys' stuff,' although apparently this is OK as it's a 'love story' and a tired and hackneyed enough basic situation to satisfy her fans. (Actually she didn't say the last bit.)"

Small Press. *Light's List* (17th ed, 2002) covers over 1,500 English-language small press mags worldwide. 70pp. £2.50 inc post (US\$6; \$7 air) to John Light, 37 The Meadows, Berwick-upon-Tweed, TD15 1NY.

Thog's Masterclass. "The zeppelin of bluster Feldman excoriated Freddy with suddenly popped into a cloud of humility." (David Grand, *The Disappearing Body*, 2002) "Schofield and Logan fought hard, covered in red emergency lighting." (Matthew Reilly, *Area 7*, 2001) *Dept of Posh Talk*. "He abluted, accoutred, ate and arrived downstairs in the communal vestibule in good time to be picked up by Hans." (James Lovegrove, "Piecework" in *Hideous Progeny*, 1999).

K-PAX: Prot (Kevin Spacey) has a particular fondness for produce.

Nick Lowe

MUTANT POPCORN

Casenotes summary: patient is a popular audio-visual medium, a little over a century old, in good shape for its age, but gripped by a deep schizoid derangement resulting in a severely dissociative model of self and reality. The patient's scripts, and a voluminous body of instructional writings produced in support, show an obsession with the doctrine of a single central figure or Hero around whom all narrative, and reality, revolves, and with whom all interacting subjects are assumed to "identify." (One of the stranger articles of delusion is the insistence that the father-son relationship is the only real human bond, because sons and fathers are in some enigmatic sense the same person.) These narratives are themselves then systematically optimized further to appeal to shallow, insecure, self-obsessed professional performers with mass public access, posing a serious risk to the population at large. The insistence that there is only one experiencing subject, and that all the rest are "supporting cast" or "expendables," is potentially highly contagious, with some diagnoses speaking openly of a viral psychosis that persistently urges the entire consumer base to believe that nobody else is as real as you. The possible involvement of organized memetic terrorism remains a speculation at this stage; but the dossier is bulging.

Take **K-PAX**, a largely faithful screen adaptation of the first of Gene Brewer's rather wearing novels about the is-he/isn't-he alien visitant "prot" (lowercase sic, o long), with Kevin

Spacey doing the star role and Jeff Bridges being his waveringly sceptical shrink. In the books, the therapist/narrator emerges vindicated, if only to his own satisfaction, in his conviction that prot is merely a secondary personality born of psychic trauma whose secret history is gradually excavated as the sessions progress, and the loose ends of inexplicable evidence that seem to support prot's alien origins are sufficiently feebly rationalized that the reader is left free to draw less sceptical conclusions. Since both novel and film only make any kind of consistent sense on the assumption that prot is both-and rather than either-or, Iain Softley's film version judiciously tones down the forced scepticism; but it still endorses the creaky apparatus of pat psychiatric plotting according to which all psychoses can be cured by good detective work, and if you just track down the trigger event in the patient's past you can turn off all nuttiness at the tap. (Brewer's own more-of-the-same sequel, *On a Beam of Light*, actually culminates with prot's final reintegration into his host personality, along with two further multiples that emerge along the way.)

In the end, though, it doesn't make much odds whether prot is real or figment, because in a fundamental sense there's only one character in this story from the start. A giveaway in the novels is that the Bridges character is called "Gene Brewer" – even though the real Brewer is a retired biochemist, not a doctor in a Manhattan psychiatric hospital – whose case histories become a bestselling book called

K-PAX, and the second novel actually culminates in the sale of the film rights, an event accompanied by the birth to prot's human host of a son called (of course) Gene. One of the more tiresome things about the novels is the largely undisguised way in which both the sceptical scientist and the starman guru come over as dialogic projections of the author's own wordy inner debates on environment, ethics, and humanity's future. And the film adaptation compounds this in a number of ways: most notably, by eliminating the novel's third lead, the female journalist drawn into a tentative romantic triangle with the two antagonists. Instead her role in the plot has been reincorporated into the Jeff Bridges host personality, who now does all her gumshoe work himself, and acquires a new and very Hollywood heal-thyself plot about (ha, guess what) being a father to his son. The novels never quite spell out, and perhaps aren't fully aware of, this connection between their own glib MPD narratives and the story's own relationship to its cast of characters; but it becomes particularly insistent when you see it up on screen as a Hollywood narrative populated with Hollywood stars. The script could frankly have used some more development before FilmFour let go of their shoot money; but as you'd expect, it's all *very* actor-friendly. Both leads are on fair if hardly career-best form, and an excellent supporting cast of veteran character players makes a meal of the nuthouse inmates with their lovable psychotic disorders, all painlessly

healed by the angelic light of the stars doing what star people do. For in the end, it doesn't matter whether the voices are real or not, and whether the platitudes you speak are the truths of an advanced cosmic civilization or the messianic drivelling of a screwed-up nutzo; all that matters is whether other people believe you, and listen as they would to the wisdom of the stars.

Mind you, being the master of the universe has its downside. "In the end," as Anne Rice's celebrity vampire Lestat glumly reflects in a lugubrious moment in *Queen of the Damned*, "we are alone, and there is nothing but the cold, dark wasteland of eternity." As an immortal, a bestselling author, an unaccountably popular global rock star, and now the hero of his own movie franchise, Lestat is in a better position than most to pontificate gothically on the existential tedium of undying fame and universal adulation; and frankly if you've seen the movie you can understand why he's so underwhelmed. *Queen of the Damned* is an uneasy Australian attempt to lift the coffin-lid on the movie franchise of Rice's Vampire Chronicles, eight years on from Neil Jordan's terminally upmarket *Interview with the Vampire*. Certainly it couldn't distance itself any farther from its precursor. Where Jordan's film was insistently classy and packed with miscast A-list talent, *Queen* is a coarse celebration of all the cheesier elements of Rice's sequels, reproducing the wonky plotting and infatuation with the increasingly narcissistic characters, but without the density and detail that make the early instalments still relatively readable and evocative for those who have the taste. The best that can be said for Stuart Townsend's disquietingly Geldofesque Lestat is that he plays the character faithfully as written, though it's a much camper vamp than *Interview*'s Tom Cruise version – itself not exactly a benchmark – and none of the rest of the cast are any better. Aaliyah, especially, in the rather walk-on title role of the reincorporate Mummy of all vampires, leaves a truly bizarre memorial performance, compounding some startling Nubian-camp dress sense with gold-painted ears, Plan 9-style arm movements, and a baffling Old Kingdom Jamaican accent ("Aal you wishes am come true," &c.).

It's all a sad travesty even of its flabby source, but all sympathy goes to the screenwriters for at least trying to knock some filmic shape into Rice's ungainly narrative, which has been well and truly gutted of all its internal meat in order to serve up something that can at least pass by day as a conventional movie narrative. Their lives



haven't been made any easier by the decision to skip straight to volume three, so that chunks of Rice's earlier sequel *The Vampire Lestat* (in which her series mythology was first systematically worked out) have to be bundled into prologue and flashbacks; nor by the fact that *Queen* was the first Chronicles novel to move beyond a single first-person narrator, leaving the film version to muddle along with a chaotic tangle of voiceovers and analepses from both Lestat and his vampire-huntress groupie Jesse. But their relationship, which the film uses for a centre in the absence of anything more promising, becomes an all too

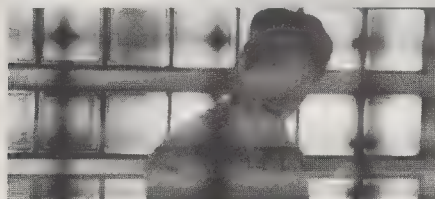


obvious distillation of Rice's own increasingly infatuate relationship with her own creation: a loose string of middle-aged adolescent fantasies glued together with tortuous motivation or none, enhanced in the film version by a soundtrack as awful as the dialogue ("A kingdom of corpses? Why?" – "Why not?"). An absurd happy ending has Lestat and Jesse walking hand-in-hand over Westminster Bridge towards a ten-times-normal-size Big Ben. Evidently the cold dark wasteland of eternity isn't so bad if you've got a date with you to help check out the nightlife.

There are moments during *Queen's* considerable longueurs when one aches for *Blade 2* to come bounding in from the screen next door and give them all a good slicing. "I hate vampires," our man voiceovers after the big stunt slaughter opening; but he soon makes his peace, for *Blade 2* is a faithful movie implementation of the classic pattern of comics sequel in which not only are decisively killed-off guru figures casually resurrected, but former enemies unite in the common cause of resistance to an even more powerful supervillain. In this case, the nemesis is Luke Goss's eugenically-created metavampire, who feeds on undead and humans alike, and has shed all but one of the tiresome genre vulnerabilities that make Blade's workaday foes such a comparative pushover. So after some obligatory initial bonding with his vampire teammates by Mexican standoff with swords, Blade is soon working the nightlife alongside his former foes (since here too what the *Queen of the Damned* credits call "Euro Trash Vampires" turn out to have a lively underground club scene, where funky gothic types can french with razorblades to bassy undead rap) and going from one stunt combat to the next without so much as a pause to remove his shades.

The main interest of *Blade 2* is its enticement back to Hollywood of the mad Mexican visionary Guillermo del Toro, who fled town after the grim experience of making his US debut *Mimic*. Though he's clearly having fun learning about action fantasy, and the visual style has a lot of trademark imagery, it has to be said that even *Mimic*, where the director's work was constantly thwarted and finally recut by the studio, remains a far more individual and interesting film than this very routine sequel, however flashily directed. The Prague settings are well used, and it's nice to see the city playing itself for a change, but returning writer David Goyer has fairly stripped-down ambitions for the script (vampire coroner, sniffing finger: "Neurotoxin"), and Blade himself is an

even more unidimensional figure than on his first item. Still, there's nothing in the contract to say that just because you're humanity's sole hope against the forces of darkness you have to have a personality, and who needs personality when you've got attitude? *En garde*, bloodsuckers!



The One: Jet Li

More iconic superhero narrative for the aspiring schizoid is James Wong's tellingly-titled *The One* – a film which seems to go out of its way to mimic a comics movie without actually being based on one. (Even the title seems a nod to Rick Veitch, to whom needless to say the actual film owes nothing whatever.) Certainly it's packed with time-honoured comics tropes, including multiverse hopping, entry-level superpowers of enhanced strength and speed, and martial-artsy superhero/supervillain duels where they take turns throwing one another against walls of collapsible machinery. A kind of mid-Pacific marriage of *Highlander* with the complete works of Keith Laumer, *The One* has LA cop Jet Li playing parallel selves in our world and what used to be 123 others, before all the rest got bumped off by a rogue counterpart turned dimension-hopping serial assassin. Since with each hit the strength of the dead parasite is redistributed among the survivors, the good and evil Jet get to spend most of the movie using their powers to do preposterous enhanced stunt jumps at one another. Simply as a further chapter in the takeover of the Hollywood superhero movie by Hong Kong style and talent, it's a well-chosen vehicle for the English-language debut of its star. But casting Jet Li in a double role has called for some fairly extreme solutions to circumvent the problems of telling the nice and the nasty Jets apart, given that our hero's range of expression is underplayed only by his delivery of English dialogue. In the event, it proves necessary to minimize the Two's scenes together before their final mano-a-mano – where the bad Jet pauses to remove his jacket for no other evident reason than to make the characters visually distinguishable in stunt shots. Disappointingly for its premise, neither character ever gets to be The One, so we never get to see anyone becoming God or destroying the universe as variously promised. Maybe in *The One II*.

Meanwhile, younger viewers can find reassurance that they're special and everyone else isn't in *Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius*, a film that deftly infantilizes the desire for god-head in terms any seven-year-old male can relate to. Indeed, I can't think of a film that's so unsettlingly captured the world of the primary-school male imagination, much of which I'd forgotten until this eerily spot-on evocation: a daily routine embedded with technowizardry and adventure, in which gadget escapades and quick jaunts into space slot themselves neatly into the interstices around breakfast, school and homework. Like most males susceptible to this kind of fantasy, Jimmy is underappreciated by peers, physically self-conscious, and for close friendship falls back on fellow outcasts like the fat kid with the inhaler. Of course, all that changes when fried-egg people from a distant star system abduct all the town's parents for food, and the whole class unites under Jimmy's leadership in an interstellar task force to restore the family and give Johnny Space Monster a whupping. Just like in real life.

An only-in-cinemas pilot for a heavily-touted Nickelodeon TV franchise, *Jimmy Neutron* isn't entirely comfortable on the big screen, where its potato-headed CG character design looks cheap and unattractive; but once Jimmy and pals blast off into extrasolar space in a converted theme park the backgrounds take off gloriously, and though the jokes have to be explained a bit more carefully than an older-pitched franchise would call for, the script is generally quite snappy. (Jimmy is parentally chastised for making first contact: "I don't care *how* advanced they are – if your father and I haven't met them, they're strangers.") It is of course in every sense a family movie, taking all pains to reassure the young that parents and institutional authority do serve a purpose for now, even if they're strictly dispensable in the wider context of your manifest destiny and obvious if under-recognized superiority to your fellow humans. Before: "I'd wish for no more parents. That way we could be free. We'd have fun *all the time*." After: "I am never going to com-



plain about my parents again." And just as the family-bonding finale starts to get embarrassing, everybody accidentally drinks Jimmy's burp potion and dialogue is drowned in amusing rude body noises. Happy faces all round.

Less happy is the holiday season's other digital family toon *Ice Age*, which only a year ago would have seemed a much more innovative film, but suffers now from sharing a premise with *Dinosaur* and a plot with *Monsters, Inc.*, without the script coming close to the level of either. Limply plotted and unevenly paced, with some strong visual set pieces (especially the opening) but startlingly weak characterizations and dialogue, it early on abandons the epic sweep of continent-wide migration and extinction for a literally plodding four-hander set among jagged, near-abstract 3D backgrounds of ice and rock that are often arresting in themselves but unavoidably samey to the eye.

Like *Dinosaur*, *Ice Age* is dedicated to the fervent denial of Darwin ("Survival of the fittest? I don't think so!"). Its plot demonstrates the evolution of co-operation through the obligatory odd-couple alliance of a big furry behemoth (Manfred the mammoth) and an annoying fast-talking little twerp (Sid the sloth) in their quest to restore a cute pre-loquent human foundling to its family in the teeth of treachery from within their own team. Much is made of Manny's ideological stance against the law of the jungle, mammoths being both vegetarian ("I don't like animals that kill") and herd animals ("That's what you do in a herd. We look out for each other"); while Sid, like the luvv monkey in *Dinosaur*, is only trapped in reproductive unsucccess because he's simply too annoying to be considered parenting material by a prospective mate. ("All the sensitive ones get eaten," sighs a lady sloth, going right to the heart of the game-theoretical problem that the film seeks vainly to resolve.) In the end, Sid, Manny, and rogue sabre-tooth Diego convince themselves that saving the Neanderthal baby is in their own interests as species: "Maybe because we save him, he won't hunt." It's a sweet thought, but as with *Dinosaur* the oddly-conceived attempt to make a feelgood movie about mass extinction flies in the face of the regrettable truth that you don't see a lot of mammoths and sabre-tooths around these days to vindicate our heroes' faith in the survival value of altruism. If only Manny and Sid had made it into the age of movies, they'd know all too well it's a zero-sum world out there, and there can only be one winner.

Nick Lowe

Osmund Considers

Timons Esaias

Osmund was reading a book, a book of high adventure on deep oceans in times gone by. The book failed to hold his entire attention so that his senses wandered – taking in the comfort of the leather wingback chair in which he lounged, the aroma of his rare Turkmani cigars, the loveliness of the woodwork which decorated the library from floor to ceiling where it yielded to a magnificent fresco of Thor trying to wrest the double-headed axe from the grasp of the strange Oriental deities of the Minoans. For a moment his attention returned to the voice of his lector, and the hero's struggle between his deepest urges and his bounden duty.

For the first time in a while, in weeks and weeks, Osmund had a thought.

"Duty?" he said.

"Your Grace?" the lector replied, breaking off the narration.

"Duty. It's very important. Yet what *is* duty? Exactly?"

"Duty, your Grace, is that obligation which an individual owes to others, and the acting upon that obligation." The lector seemed to pause for emphasis. "Duty, in the final analysis, is the structural steel upon which the Nation depends for its stability."

Osmund took a cigar from the box at his elbow; placed the end into the cutter, which made a satisfying snick; then held it out for the lighter to focus its beam on the other end. "But what, to be specific, is *my* duty?" A luscious cloud of blue smoke rose from the cigar, and the lighter's beam cut out.

The lector's tone grew slightly unctuous. "Duty, your Grace, is essentially a one-way obligation. Duty is owed by the lesser to the greater; it is owed upward. All the servitors here at the Club, for instance, owe to your Grace the duties of instant obedience, courteous service, and careful planning. Your Grace, however, has no superiors, and therefore has no duties."

Some hours later, as the waitroids were clearing away the pheasant d'orange and bringing in the cold soup, he asked the chandelier the question he had been trying to formulate all afternoon. "The books sometimes speak of people having duties to themselves. What duties have I, to myself?"

"None," the chandelier replied, its voice high and crystal clear and grace-noted with a tinkling like that of chimes. "Before humans were perfected they sometimes felt themselves to have a higher and a lower self. It must have been very difficult. With that understanding, they would therefore feel that the lower selves owed duties to the higher selves. When the lower selves failed in their duty in small ways there would be comedy. When the failures were large, there would often be tragedy."

Osmund spooned his soup quietly, but the chandelier did not continue. Finally he asked, "But in my case...?"

"Perfected humans, your Grace, have just one self. There can be no duty where there is no discrepancy of caste."

The soup was magnificent.

"Women!" Osmund exclaimed, echoing the line the lector had just pronounced. The lector did not reply, in deference to the billiard shot that Osmund seemed on the verge of making. He put his cue at rest, though, and slid one hip onto the rail of the table. "They are great objects of desire, are they not?"

"Yes, your Grace. When humans were subject to inordinate desire, women frequently gave rise to it – most generally among unneutered males. Equally, female humans found some men desir..."

"Have I ever seen a woman?"

"Outside of sensoria and of static artworks, I assume you mean? No, your Grace has never actually seen a woman in person."

Osmund scratched the side of his head with the end of the cue, leaving a trail of blue chalk in his hair. "And why not?"

"Contact between humans can lead to procreation."

"And that would be bad, would it?"

"Very bad, your Grace. It is my duty, and the duty of everything here at the Club, to prevent it."

Osmund took a rare turn on the Club's gallery, with its exceptional views of the City. The thick windows prevented any unpleasant chemicals or drafts, and the volume had been turned very low so that he heard the outside noises only as a murmur, for the Club knew that Osmund did not

care for clatter.

He stood for a time watching the traffic on the Avenue upon which the Club fronted, an Avenue whose name escaped him. He did not ask it. A steady stream of androids and other servitors bustled about their business, some on the sidewalk wearing great hats and flowing cloaks to protect them from all the things in the environment. Most, however, travelled in vehicles: open chariots, automobiles, one-horse hansom cabs, drayage wagons, helicarcs and trucks. There was a steam locomotive and small Pullman car, though without rails, chugging its way from the east. Osmund knew from his books that these vehicles would never have been seen together, not before modern times. He felt a surge of almost pain, a deep pity, for the bleak lives people had led in the past, surrounded by the artifacts of only one era at a time.

Perhaps, he reminded himself quickly, they did not mind it as I would. After all, the lesson he had been taught in childhood about the old times was that irrational humankind, imperfected humankind, had been uncomfortable with, and intolerant of, difference.

He strode down to the end of the North gallery, turned along the West gallery and paced its full length, and finally turned into the observation bay at the corner for the view of the canal and river. Just 30 metres away a two-masted Viking longship sat outside the canal lock, waiting for the gates to open. The servitor at the steering oar seemed heavily tarnished from exposure, almost etched. Osmund wondered briefly where the ship had come from, and whither it was bound, but he did not inquire. A gentleman, he knew, did not pester the staff with too many questions, and he had already asked several this week.

Out on the river a three-masted, barque-rigged submarine was making sail and steering for the estuary channel and the sea. Gaslights twinkled through the windows all along the Texas deck, suggesting both gaiety and elegant comfort. Were it at all polite, perhaps he would have inquired as to what individual was aboard, but he only imagined himself there, cruising among the islands of the Skagerrak, or creeping through schools of giant squid.

"I believe I would like to take a trip," he announced. "By train, perhaps." He took out a cigarillo which he fitted into his most ornate meerschauum holder, paused to admire the way the oils from the tobacco had coloured it a faint rose, and then held it out for a lighter. "Into the mountains."

Osmund watched with some fascination as the servitors hustled several trunks through the Club doors into the enclosed porte-cochere, and then took shelter inside while the outer door was lifted, in portcullis fashion, to allow a magnificent team of three matching cream horses and grey-black offside outrider to draw in a sky-blue coach with brilliant brass trim.

The portcullis lowered into place, and again the servitors bustled about, loading the trunks on top and behind the carriage, and setting up a small gangway so that Osmund would not even need to descend the stairs and then step up into the coach, but could walk directly into it. A maidroid scurried up, silk and taffeta rustling, and

handed a breast-pocket cigar box to the butler, who stepped forward, bowed precisely, and presented it to Osmund with the brief words, "for the road, your Grace."

As the carriage trundled smartly along the Avenue, turning in the Square and partly circling the monuments, Osmund busied himself with pouring a demitasse of espresso. He had experienced these same streets in a variety of sensoria, but could not be sure how long it had been since he had actually, personally, travelled them. A question on this subject formed in his mind, though it came forth with an alteration.

"How old am I?"

"As your Grace will no doubt remember, it is considered improper for servants to remind one."

"Yes. Yes, indeed." Osmund sank back into the cushions and realized, with surprise, that he must be very old in the terms that animals and earlier humans had used. Really, really quite old. "Of course."

At the entrance to the Underway he was hustled into an elevator, and his trunks into another, and disgorged directly into the observation room of the canal boat which would carry him to the train station. He actually experienced a delay before the elevators disconnected from the boat and it began to motor along the dark tunnel of the subterranean canal. He remembered the dark tunnel and its suggestion of dankness from previous journeys, but had forgotten the murals and the mosaics. On the port side there were elaborate, and highly metaphorical, interpretations of the Stations of the Invention of the True Telephone. On the starboard, in reverse, were realistic portrayals of the great confrontations of non-violence, and interspersed among them were elegant collage and shadow-box pieces commemorating many of the notable Peaces in human history.

He noted that the explanatory voice in his inner ear for the series of Stations was that of a child, and for the other side was an authoritative male. He remembered how, as a very young person, he had often strained to get one eye on one set of paintings and the other on a different set so that the inner voices would overlap and give him the illusion of being in a party or slightly crowded room.

The memory amused him, but he did not repeat the experiment.

After dining on lentils, squab, and medallions of mastodon, with an extremely cunning claret, Osmund entered the forward car of his train and sprawled in the observation bay to watch the hills crawl by. He was enjoying travel, and congratulating himself on getting out of the Club for a few days.

For some reason, perhaps his recent reading, perhaps in reaction to the futurism of the newest sensoria, he found himself dwelling on the past. Much of the countryside was wild, with full-grown trees that formed an impenetrable green wall on each side of the right-of-way for several miles at a stretch. There were many farms, but they were not nearly so densely situated as they once had been, when this whole land had been lumbered clear and fenced and closely cultivated or grazed. He saw barns and crofts here and there, even the occasional house or small village, but knew that such things were kept up for aes-

thetic reasons now. Storage and stalls would all be underground, along with whatever closets and repair bays the servitors needed.

Not much of what these farms produced could be safely used, in any case. That would change, of course. Over time.

He had begun to nod off when the train turned into a fairly tight bend, overlooking a dell filled with ornamental gardens and graciously bordered ponds. As they drew further into the bend Osmund realized that there was a second set of three private cars toward the rear of the train, behind a series of flat-cars stacked with great slabs of limestone. Someone else must be taking a trip into the hills.

For a moment he thought he saw a flash, a merest glimpse, of auburn hair in one of the observation bays, and he quickly motioned for the curtains to block the view. One must not be rude.

The display cases along the credenzas of the smoking lounge were filled with a marvellous collection of dress swords, presentation dirks and several incredibly beautiful boxes of duelling pistols – representing every era of weaponry from matchlock to fusion torch. Near the ceiling were ornately decorated hunting muskets, with Persian and Mughal stocks. These were nothing, however, compared to the various cuffs and locking sleeves that had been used for passive resistance and so beautifully decorated that trying to cut or break them would be reprehensible, regardless of the cause being promoted by the protesters.

"Excuse me, your Grace."

"Yes?" Osmund turned from his examination of the display to find the valet proffering a tray bearing a gift-wrapped cube. There was, unaccountably, a scent of sandalwood in the room.

"A gift, a souvenir of a chance encounter." The valet remained in its proffering posture, but slid the tray onto the nearest table. "Another citizen, whose cars were attached to this train, sent it to you with her compliments."

Osmund stared at the present, quite astounded. He had not had a gift in so long he barely knew what to do. "'Were attached,' I understood you to say?"

"Indeed. The citizen's cars diverted at the last switch."

"Well. Be sure and see that something appropriate is sent along to her with my compliments."

"Certainly."

The gift, when he finally brought himself to destroy the wrapping, proved to be a solid topaz statue of a hippogryph. The talons were beryl, the hooves ruby, the feathers mother-of-pearl, the mustachios emerald and the eyes inset with obsidian. He knew that he would treasure it for the rest of his life, a memorial to the link that binds humankind.

"Good thing we didn't procreate," he muttered.

"Your Grace?" the centrepiece replied.

"Nothing. A joke."

He did not go to his sleeping compartment that evening, but spent the night smoking and wondering about the woman in the other cars. What her life had been like. What other travels she might have taken.

Hours later, in the small hours of the morning, he realized that he had decided that the servitors were wrong about duty. He could not phrase it precisely, even to himself; and to speak it aloud would be to invite argument and correction from the staff. But he did have some kind of duty, an important one, if somewhat vague. He owed a duty to the time when the world would be less threatening, and its wounds had healed. A duty to a time – he felt certain it would be a *time* more than a *place* – when humans might again be trusted to meet face to face; when humans would begin to take another step in their history.

He had not the vaguest idea what that step might be. He did feel, however, that even a perfected human might act wrongly, or somehow, thoughtlessly, delay the healing. It would be his duty to consider the situation. His duty to act for the best.

"In the morning," he said to the ashtray. "I would like to return to my Club."

Timons Esaias has appeared in *Interzone* four times before, with "Norbert and the System" (issue 73), "A Changing of the Guard" (issue 87), "The Mars Convention" (issue 135) and "Shift Change" (issue 137). Other stories, poems and humorous articles have appeared in various magazines and anthologies. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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The Scratchings on the Wall

Martha A. Hood

The luminescent dial read 2 a.m. Just as I thought of it, before I could reach for the switch, the light by my side of the bed turned itself on, illuminating a room too intense to be true – emerald green walls, sunny gold ceiling, and polished dark wood floors. I lay in a bed set diagonally in the corner, topped with thick, soft bedding in a rich shade of cream. The other side of the bed was empty, as I expected it to be. It was Saturday night – Sunday morning, actually.

I padded down the hall and peeked into Amy's room. My heart leapt to my throat when I saw her empty bed. She was fifteen now, but the older she got, the more I worried about her.

I went to the kitchen. The light in there was terribly dim, but no matter what wattage I used, the deep brown walls of the kitchen sucked up most of the light. I rummaged through the papers on the desk in there, looking for Amy's soccer roster.

She had called at ten o'clock from a pizza party she was at with her soccer team, wondering if she could stay a bit longer, and assuring me she could get a ride home. I assumed she had gone to a friend's house for the night, but I had no idea whose, and I couldn't find the roster with the phone numbers. I had been a terrible mother lately. There had been so many distractions, none of which were as important as my daughter, but all of which I had let get in the way.

I called Roy's cell. He didn't answer. I left a message on his voice mail. I didn't know where he was, exactly, just that the Olwon were scanning him. It would help if he came home once in a while. I didn't understand. If he was busy with them all day, why did he have to spend half the night there, too? Well, I guess I knew the answer to that. Roy liked a good time, and I thought it more than likely the Olwon were making sure he didn't lack for something to drink or someone to play poker with. The rumour was that they even put on the occasional girly show – using Olwon females no less – for the human males who worked with them. I supposed it was true.

As I hung up, I caught sight of some scratchings, over the stove and on the cabinets. I had not noticed them when I first went in there.

In the kitchen's gloom, the markings shone as bright, thin white lines. Both pretty and disturbing, they looked like writing. I squinted to see if I could make some sense of them.

As if the Olwon would write me a message. I wanted Roy to get home so he could see the markings. Maybe after working with the aliens so much, he would have some insight into their thinking.

Who was I kidding? The point of Roy's (and others') working with them was so that the Olwon could understand us, not vice-versa.

The scratchings started to work on me, like a Super Bowl commercial, or a song played every twenty minutes on the radio, or the pretty lies I allowed myself to believe. I had never seen these markings before, but they had a maddeningly familiar quality. They had power.

The Olwon were so very cool in their power over us. On those early occasions when humankind took hostile action against them, the Olwon exhibited frightening restraint. Scud missiles aimed at them disintegrated in mid-flight, a hydrogen bomb was neutralized, and a would-be suicide terrorist lived to be shamed by his failure. No attack drew punishment; the perpetrators merely had their toys taken from them.

"Damn you," I said to the wall, for it was pulling my attention away from the soccer roster. I looked in the living room for it, with no luck.

The automatic sprinklers kicked on. I heard the familiar whoosh, but they were going off at the wrong time. It was about two-thirty a.m.; they were supposed to go off at six. I heard a cascade, like a waterfall, coming from the kitchen. I ran in there.

Water streamed down the wall over the range. A second waterfall curtained the window and splashed into the sink. I tried but couldn't figure out where the water behind the range was going. I walked around the kitchen in a kind of shock, looking first at one waterfall, then the other. I thought I had become used to the never-ending and odd emergencies of my life, but this was over the top. I found my clogs and ran out the back door to turn it off.

The night was thick with fog, and I had to feel along the wall to find the sprinkler timer. With so little light, I couldn't see the panel inside the box, but I managed to find the button and slide it over to what I knew was the "off" position.

Ten minutes later, inside, I heard the next section come on, which made no sense, as I had turned the whole system off. Nonetheless, I heard a rush of water coming from the living room. I went in there, and yes, it was coming down the wall behind the couch.

Once again I went out the back door, but this time I stopped short on the porch.

The fog had given way to utter blackness. It was the wrong colour of black. No matter how dark the night, there was always a bit of moonlight or starlight or streetlight to give shape to the darkness, but not this time. There was nothing out there, nothing beyond the edge of my back porch. To go further was to step off into the void. The blackness threatened to suck the breath out of me. I guessed that time was slipping. Again. I went back inside.

In another ten minutes, the sprinklers had shut off on their own. I tried the number Roy had given me once more, and this time, he answered. I told him all about Amy being gone, the waterfalls everywhere, and the scratchings on the wall.

He told me not to worry. "I'll be home soon," he said.

"When?" I asked.

"Soon."

"Roy, it's black out there. Time is slipping, I think."

"In that case, there's no point in my coming home. I might not be able to get through."

We both knew that was true. And under his voice I could hear other voices. Laughter. Glasses clinking. The husky voices of Olwon women.

"I have to hang up," he said. "We're in the middle of a session."

No doubt they were, even amid the clinking glasses and the laughter.

I went back to our room, and lay in bed. With the light out, in the dark, I could pretend this was an ordinary room, in an ordinary house. I could lose the miserable uncertainty that taunted me when I opened my eyes. A deep blue exhaustion came over me; too tired to worry, I dropped into sleep.

When I awakened, it was morning. The other side of the bed was still empty. I got up, opened the curtain, and peeked outside.

We were socked in by fog; I could barely make out the far end of our back yard – but there, next to the barbecue, I saw a large lump. It was too large for a dog, but then what was it? I had a feeling.

I charged out the back door, barefoot. I stopped just short of it.

My daughter, Amy, was curled up asleep with a dire wolf. A dusting of frost capped her thick red hair. The wolf nuzzled its nose into her armpit. These animals were common in this area ten thousand years ago, along with the sabre-toothed cat, the mastodon, and others, and the first time I saw a live prehistoric animal, it was a thrill. Seeing one curled up with my daughter was a different matter. I walked around them, uncertain what to do. I took a step closer. Amy stirred. The wolf awoke. It growled at me. It seemed to think it was supposed to protect Amy.

She awoke. "What the –"

"Stay where you are," I told her. I backed up slowly. It kept its eyes on me and its teeth bared. Amy slowly stood. When I was almost to the back porch, Amy started to walk carefully and deliberately toward me. The wolf whimpered. It got that look on its face that the animals

get. This time-slippage thing, it bewilders them. The poor thing started quivering and cowering. Who knows what it saw when it saw me? Or why it curled up with Amy last night? It walked backward a step or two, belly low to the ground, then leapt and sped away.

I went and put my arms around my daughter. She felt a bit cold, but the wolf had kept her warm enough.

She said, "I tried to come in last night, but the front door was all wrong."

"I know. A lot of things were wrong last night."

She stopped on the back porch step. "Coach dropped me off about eleven? And he like, probably saw me go in the front door? Only it didn't go inside? It went into the back yard?"

"You're talking in question marks." I pulled her inside. "Let me make you some breakfast."

"It was so weird. I kept going around, back to the front door, and it kept taking me into the backyard."

"Funny. I turned off the sprinklers about two. But the fog was so thick, I couldn't see you. Then, just a few minutes later –"

"I know. You couldn't see anything at all, right?"

"It was like nothing was out there at all."

"It was so scary. I can't believe I fell asleep."

I made pancakes. She went through her ritual with them, the same she had followed since she was three – carefully spreading butter over each of her two pancakes, and pouring exactly one ounce of syrup over each of them.

It was then that the scratchings on the wall caught her eye. "What are those?" She shoved a bite of pancake into her mouth and went in there to see.

I followed. "I don't know what they are. They just appeared last night."

"Are you sure you didn't do it yourself?"

I looked at her. She was serious. "Why would I do that?"

She shrugged. "You've been kind of, like, stressed lately."

"I didn't do it. They did. Just like they do everything else around the house."

"Yeah, but why?"

"I don't know. They say the time-slippage is a mistake, a by-product of the other things they give us. Maybe the writing is too."

She stood on tiptoe and stretched her fingers up to touch it. "It's like chalk. You could probably wash it off." She started to scratch at it with her fingernail.

I grabbed her wrist. "Don't."

She frowned. "Why not?"

I couldn't really answer.

"Are you afraid they'll do something to you?"

I couldn't answer that, either.

"I mean, I can't see what difference it makes." She dropped her hand to her side. "They'll probably get us in the end anyway. We might as well maintain a little dignity."

"We can't do anything about them, so we have to accept the good they have to offer."

She shook her head. "I hate them." She turned her back to me and went back to her pancakes. "All my friends get to live in the real world. Why can't I?"

"We have it good," I said. "Remember what it was like before? With your dad out of work, there was never enough money for anything. We were always worried."

"What's wrong with Dad anyway?" She swished a bit of pancake in her syrup. "What's his problem? He's so weird. And he's never here."

"He's had a rough time. He does his best."

She frowned. "Rough time? What about you? You've had a rough time, too, but you don't go around having mental breakdowns every time something happens."

"Neither does he," I said firmly, although I had had the same thought. "Anyway, as I was saying, with the arrangement we have with the Olwon, we don't have to worry any more."

"You're worried," she said. "You're always worried."

"Not like before they came. We were always broke, then. The house was all run-down. Remember how the hot water would go out? Or when the furnace was out half the winter?"

"Now the front door disappears in the middle of the night. Big improvement!"

"We get to see prehistoric animals; that's pretty wonderful, I think."

She scowled. "You said yourself it's just an Olwon mistake. What other mistakes have they made, do you think, mistakes we don't know about?"

We heard the front door open, and Roy came in. Amy gave him a surly greeting and slouched off to her room.

Roy hung in the doorway and looked after her sadly. After a moment he turned to me. "I'm sorry. They wouldn't let me go. They kept asking more questions."

"It's okay."

"I just wish I could do better, you know?"

"I know."

"I see Amy got home all right."

"She couldn't get in the front door. Everything was all cockeyed. This morning I found her in the back yard, sleeping with a dire wolf."

He looked pained at hearing this. He sighed and went into the kitchen. I followed and waited for him to react to the scratchings. He never looked up at them. He poured himself a cup of coffee, using a mug with a picture of the Olwon on it. Roy had brought home a set of four soon after he signed on with them. I didn't like to use the mugs; Roy felt we had to.

The Olwon weren't bad-looking, actually, although it's common knowledge that they have altered their photos to make themselves more appealing to us. They've got eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth, all in the right places, although there was a bit of strain in each of their visages, like one might see in a primitive face lift.

I poured myself a cup. I used one of their mugs, too, because I couldn't seem to find any others. "So what's wrong?"

"They fired me this morning."

My heart sank. "That's terrible."

"They want to interview you."

"What?"

He stared into his cup. "It came up when they asked about the house and how we liked the changes. I shared

some of your reactions, and well, all of a sudden they wanted you instead of me."

I could hear the resentment in his voice. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

"I had no idea this would be so intrusive."

At that he shrugged. "Working" for the aliens had been his first paying job since his breakdown, and he was proud of being able to bring in money again. The Olwon had made it possible for us to pay off our debts to friends and relatives, and to afford Roy's medication. Was it possible the price was too high?

Roy traced a finger over one of the faces on his coffee mug. "You need to go for an interview. They're at the pier."

They were always at the pier, because one of their landing sites was just offshore. I stood, went into the living room, and drew the curtains back from our living room window. It had turned into a really pretty morning. The front lawn was so green you could smell it. The peach tree was delicate in its bareness. Azaleas bloomed just the other side of the white picket fence. "I guess there's no way out of it. If that's what they want."

He came out to the living room and stood beside me. "I don't know what they want. Sometimes I wish they'd just enslave us, or kill us, and be done with it."

I made it clear I wouldn't go talk to the Olwon alone, and so Amy and Roy went with me.

On the way to meet with them, looking out the car window, I had to admit that the houses kept up by the Olwon really looked nice, with green lawns and trimmed trees. The streets controlled by the Olwon were smooth and free of potholes. The areas outside the Olwon influence weren't as nice. Lots of strip malls and ugly industrial areas. Of course, in the non-Olwon areas, you didn't have to worry about time slides, or finding a mastodon in the middle of the road.

We parked two blocks from the beach. We could see the water and the Olwon ship bobbing in the swells several hundred yards out from the pier. The beachfront was packed with beach-goers, sightseers, and quite a few, like us, who were headed out to the end of the pier to meet the Olwon.

As we reached the pier, I started seeing them, talking and having meetings with people. We kept walking, following the directions given to Roy.

As we approached a bait shop, three black-robed figures emerged from the doorway. Their faces resembled those on the coffee mugs in some superficial sense, but with wrong proportions. However different the faces of all the animals on our planet, however homely or weird, none looked wrong the way Olwon faces do.

The smallest one spoke. "We will make ourselves comfortable."

Roy pulled some plastic chairs over and grouped them around a dirty plastic table. The smell of fish overwhelmed me. The three aliens and I sat down. The middle one politely asked Amy and Roy to leave. They walked off and I was left to face the Olwon alone. The questioning began.

"On a scale of one to ten, ten being best, what is your

opinion of humanity's relationship with the Olwon so far?" the smallest one asked.

"Five."

"And, on a scale of one to ten, ten being best, how do you rate your current lifestyle?" the smallest one continued.

As he spoke, the middle one ran a scanner over me.

"Five."

"Question three. On a scale of one to ten, ten being best, how do you rate your former lifestyle, that is, before the Olwon came?"

"Five."

The small one and the middle-sized one exchanged a glance, or I think they did. It was difficult to tell with their eyes pointing all which way.

The large one leaned forward. "You can't answer 'five' to everything."

"The answers given by the respondent are sincere," the middle one said, presenting his scanner as evidence.

This time, when the middle one and the small one exchanged a look, there was no doubt about it. The large one got into it, too, gaping at the other two.

Finally, they broke eye contact and returned to the questioning.

"Which is more important to you," the middle one asked, "the love of your family, or self-respect?"

"That's hardly a choice." A fly kept buzzing around my face, which was sweating in the heat.

"Try," the small one encouraged me.

"I'm not sure I know how it feels to have either." A terrible feeling came over me, as all of them were looking at me with their not-right eyes. "Look, I'm just tired. I can't think any more. I never seem to know where my daughter is, or my husband. The house itself might do anything, any time. Nothing makes any sense, and nothing I do, no effort I make, seems to bring any sense to it."

The small one seemed pleased. "This feeling of uncertainty you have: is it a distinctly uncomfortable feeling?"

"It's hellish."

"Is it better than or worse than your husband's mental breakdown?" the large one asked.

"Worse. Far worse."

"On a scale of one to ten, one being worst –"

"I keep thinking things can't get any more disorienting, and they do. I start having waterfalls in my kitchen and my living room."

The scanner must have been erupting with information. The middle one waved it and looked at it with intense concentration.

"But our research indicates that humans love the sound of falling water," the large one said.

"That's right," the middle one chimed in, ignoring the scanner for a moment. "You find it soothing. It's a universal response among your species."

"And then my daughter couldn't get in the house last night. This morning, I found her in the back yard, sleeping with a dire wolf."

"It's not a taboo, is it," the large one asked, "sleeping with wolves?"

"Forget taboos! She could have been eaten!"

The small one bobbed his head. "We are not certain

that the time disjunction permits such interaction."

"That's not very comforting."

The smallest one gave what might have been a one-shouldered shrug, except he did it with his knee. "Yes. The time-slippage is an annoying 'bug,' as you would call it. I confess we have not settled on a way to solve that problem."

The middle one held the scanner up to the others. "These are among the best readings I've ever had!"

I rubbed my eyes. On top of everything else, I was horribly sleep-deprived. "What do they say?"

At this he became guarded. "It is too complicated to explain."

"Then put the damn thing away," I said. "It's rude to scan people and not tell them the results."

At that point I think I wanted them to kill me, for no other reason than I was sick of the pointlessness of talking to them.

The Olwon don't kill, however. They all remained seated, although it looked more like squatting under those heavy robes.

I stood. "It's hard enough living my life. Talking about it every day is just too much. I can't work for you. Good-bye. I'm sorry. Thank you for giving me a chance." I walked away. I had gone only a few steps when I felt something grab at my ankles. I stumbled, grabbed at a pile of old tires, and fell. The Olwon did not help me up, nor could I see who or what had tripped me.

"Perhaps we could help you with your husband," the small one said. "This mental imbalance he has explained to us, this tendency toward what you call 'depression,' is the result of an error in brain chemistry."

"We know that. He takes medication."

"But it is difficult to take, the side-effects, and so forth."

"It's expensive, too."

"We can fix him," the small one said.

"He will be a better wage-earner," the middle one said.

"His behaviour will be far more predictable," the large one said, "and there will be less pressure on you."

They had just offered me the moon and stars, or close enough. "Are you saying he'll be normal?"

"We can fix the brain chemistry," the large one said.

"And you're sure you know how to do that."

"Yes." The middle one nodded. "We have scanned him, and we know what he needs. He's not far off from what he should be."

"And he need never know," the small one added.

That stopped me. Treat him but don't tell him.

"We need people like you very badly," the small one said. "With your help, and the help of others like you, we can understand your needs, and work to fill them."

I shook my head. "It's wrong to treat someone without his knowledge and consent."

"Even if it will help him?"

"In most cases, it's still wrong. That's an important human value." I pointed to the middle one and his scanner. "Make sure you include it in your results."

After a pause, they released my ankles. I stood. The middle one put his scanner away, and the other two turned away from me.

As I walked up the pier, I noticed that the other Olwon seemed to be ending their interviews, too. I wondered how many of them were helping the Olwon, and how many not.

I met Roy and Amy at the beginning of the pier. I told them what had happened, but not all of it.

Roy was not happy with me. "I hope you know what you just did," he said.

Amy said, "I'm so relieved."

"It won't be easy," I said.

We reached the car. For the first time in months, I saw it in its true state, with the dent in the front passenger door, the odd hole in the plastic bumper, and the nick in the windshield.

And so we went home.

It was easy to see the change.

Anyone who has ever had a house sitter, a teenager, or a carpet cleaner knows the experience of having things moved and not put back in the proper place. The house sitter mixes the everyday utensils with the good serving pieces, the teenager borrows her mother's jewellery and loses it, and the carpet cleaner puts the furniture back in the wrong place or not at all.

The Olwon had done a sloppy job of putting our house back the way it was.

A car unfortunate enough to have been parked in front had been disassembled. It had gotten scrambled – the fenders were where the hood should be, the rear end twisted so that the trunk rested on the asphalt, and the rear tires stuck up in the air. The prehistoric animals were carcasses that crows were picking at.

Our house looked horrible. Peeling paint, sagging fences, a cracked and crumbling driveway.

Inside was worse. Without the sheen the Olwon had put on everything, the paint on the walls was blistered and peeling, the furniture was shabby, and the house reeked of mould from the water cascades.

Roy surveyed the damage. "Well, I can fix that."

He would have plenty of time now, having lost his "job." Maybe if I went back to work and he stayed on his medication, things would work out.

The Olwon didn't have much luck with Roy and me, but others would be able to give them the information they needed. Undoubtedly, the Olwon would keep asking, probing, to answer the question of what humans want. Opinion pollsters always keep asking until they get the answers. When the Olwon get their answers, we will all be living in their world, one they've designed just for us. They will have access; in exchange, we won't be in pain. No one will know how tempted I was, out there on the pier. No one will ever know.

At that point, Roy and I had nothing to say to each other, so he wandered into the bedroom to catch up on all the sleep he'd missed.

Amy gazed out the window. "Maybe they should collect some of the extinct animals."

"You mean the remains?"

"Yeah, they should get tissue samples. You know, for the DNA, and then maybe someday –" her face fell,

"– but is there even going to be scientific research any more, now that the Olwon are here?"

I put my arm around her. "I don't know. But maybe."

She brightened a little. "This is really gross, but can I take some samples myself, and keep them in the freezer? Then I can find out later."

Why not? "Get the big chef's knife, use rubber gloves, and you know where to find the freezer storage bags."

She gave me a quick hug and gathered up the stuff. I gave her a reminder to be careful with the knife. She practically skipped out the door and down the street, toward the carrion, and out of my sight. A moment later I heard the angry cawing of crows, as Amy stole their dire wolf from them.

I went to the kitchen and stopped. The scratchings were still there. Once again they started to work on me, like a song or a slogan. I allowed myself a sigh. Then I got a brush and some soap, and I scrubbed the alien graffiti from my kitchen walls.

Martha A. Hood has contributed to *Interzone* twice before, a long time ago – "Learning the Language" (issue 42) and "Dust to Dust to..." (issue 52). She still lives in Irvine, California, and, as with Molly Brown, it's good to welcome her back. Her stories have also appeared in *Pulphouse*, *Tales of the Unanticipated* and other small-press magazines, and her collection *Inside a Bear and Other Dark Places* (containing 20 varied tales, including both her previous *IZ* pieces) appeared from Stone Dragon Press in 1999.

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News from Hilaria

Dominic Green

June 1 2023

This is my Report. Today I came top in Speling.

This is my 1st day in my New School. It is very different from my Old School. It is not in Tooting.

Today we had Geography. I learnt about the Automotive Industry of Northern Italy, because it is still necessary to learn about the Mother Country. I think Italy may be in Scotland somewhere, because Glasgow is the "Venice of the North." After Italy, we did the Great Toroid Plain. The Great Toroid Plain is scoured into fantastic landscapes by bi-coloured storms gusting up to 800 miles an hour, and is strobe-lit by spectacular lightening displays. Its industries include uraninite cinnabar and galena extraction, drilling for crude Californium deposits, and tourism.

We are sheilded and I hope that is the right speling from the Great Toroid Plain by the Fairy Ring, which is made of high mountains cut off by the sky. On Earth they would have grown even higher only here the sky cuts mountains off before they can grow higher. The sky here is not blue like a Great British sky, but is black, like the sky at night.

Dad says the sky is not blue in Great Britain either, and we are lucky to have the opportunitiey to be here. He is right off course. My Father is a physicist, which he says is like an Efervescent Pustule. It is his job to monitor the Gate's that lead in from Great Britain. He says it takes enough power to heat the Hole of Middlesbrough to keep a Gate open even for a second.

(Dad just came past and laughed at my last sentence saying "The Hole of Middlesbrough." But he said No, No, No, my speling was correct. I cannot fathom my father some times).

My Father and my Mother are Essential Personel. They made a collective decision to marry in order to make absolutely sure they both got to come to the Hawking Land Colony and bring me, as it was an Unrivalled Scientific Opportunitiey. I am sure they love each other as well. My Mother probably sufers from peer pressure though as she only sits on a Chair at a University, while my Father has a Doctorate.

Many of my freinds in Class are also Essential Personel. Their parents are clever, like mine. Together, we raise the Jean Pool of this new colony. Through no fault

of their own, however, some of my other freinds are Ancillary Personel. Their father's and mother's are not thinker's and manager's, but their job is to support the important people. Our neighbors Mr and Mrs Smith live in the cubicle next door and Mr Smith does not even know what a Quantum Wormhole is. Imagine!

There are also some of my freinds in Class, who are still my freinds, but who's parents were rushed in at the Last Minute to make our Eeyou Quota. My Dad says without this very important Quota we would not have been able to come here at all, because the Untied Kingdom gave less to the Gate Project than any other European Country save Scotland. He says the Goverment is to blame, and I am sadly forced to concur. I am pretty sure my freind Afkap Davis is a Last Minuter. His Mum works in the Colonial Offices. She has to work very hard, because all of the computerized office equipment that was sent with us does not work. My Father says this is due to the low speed of light here. This means that there is no Television or Super Nintendo in this Universe, and that we must make our own entertainment. My Father says that this is a very good thing and one of his Primary Reasons for bringing me here, and he has joined an Old Fashioned Music Hall Society. Tonight he is dressing up as Yum Yum in the Society's production of *The Mikado* by Gilbert O'Sullivan, who is a greatly respected late-20th century Music Hall writer who wrote such classics as "The Amazing Dancing Bear."

June 8 2023

This is my Report. Today we had Modern History. We learnt about the invention of the Gate Transciever by Mr Roswell of New Mexico, who examined crashed flying saucers. My Father says our understanding of Gate Transciever Technology is still not perfect. It is like being a Stone Age Savage who has discovered a television set tuned in to only one channel and cannot switch to the Adult Channel due to e.g. Paternal Control. Gate Transcievers can only send people to one other universe, and this is it. Our teacher says we are very lucky, and I am sure I agree. After the United States (which should not be called America, as there are other countries in the United States which are not America) supplied Gate Transcievers to its Western Allies, we were free to come here as well.

Virgin Universe produced the first British Gate Transciever in 2011, and soon the town of Branson was founded. It was designed to be exactly like any normal British town, and so was designed along the street plan of another successful British new town, Milton Keynes. The head of Virgin Universe, who is the son of Richard Branson the prominent 20th-century rubber enthusiast, has invested heavily in the Hawking Land Colony. Charles Branson's statue is the large one in the square welcoming us into Marks & Spencer's with a cheery smile.

We are very lucky to have a breathable oxygen atmosphere here. Today we went outside in our respirators and acid-proof suits and played football, and a Eurofighter came over and made a Gravitic Boom. Miss Day says this happens when an airplane travells really fast and its mass increases and sucks in the air. Miss Day said the Eurofighter should not have been flying over our school. She says the Ministry of Defence are conducting experiments on aircraft flying close to the Speed of Light. When the Eurofighter came towards us it was blue, but when it flew away it was red. In the changing room afterwards we made Gravitic Booms by flicking our school ties, which makes them flash all different colours, and makes the end of the tie weigh several kilograms for one tenth of a second. With this it is possible to smash things quite effectively, though it was not me who broke the washstand.

Our world is not a sphere, like a planet, but instead is another thing called a torus, which is shaped like a donut. We live on the inside where the jam would be. We are not as much on the inside as the Great Toroid Plain, however, where there is no Sky and the other side of the world can be seen if you look up. The torus revolves inside the Event Horizon of a Colossal Black Hole, which is caused by our planets Gravitational Field. All planet's are Black Holes in this universe. Because our planet revolves, our equator is traveling close to the Speed of Light. This makes it swell up in weight and is how all the weight in our world got dragged out into a donut shape round the equator. But our equator can never achieve Escape Velocity, because Escape Velocity is Infinite, and my Dad says our world rides around the inside of the Event Horizon like a perfectly frictionless bearing because it can never touch it. Mr Smith was in our cubicle fixing the sulphuric acid extractor today and told me today that people are heavier on our planets Inside Equator due to Centrifugal Force. I said my Dad said Centrifugal Force did not exist. Mr Smith said Try Telling That to Albert Veldhoeven who Fell Off Charles Branson's Statue Last Month.

Our world is called Hilaria, after the last president of America, because it was discovered by Americans. However, most Americans are ignorant of their heritage and call it Donutland instead. Some where in the centre of our Donut is the L6 point where you could put a space station without it drifting away. Unfortunately you cannot do this on our world because around the L6 point is the Naked Singularity where all mathematical laws brake down. The Naked Singularity is thort to be responsible for the frequent rain's of frogs that can be seen burning up in our high atmosphere late at night, and for the

ivers that flow uphill in the Low Sky Highlands. NASA have reportedly try'd a number of time's to orbit space craft around the Singularity, with out much success. Their last unmanned veicle came back manned.

My Dad has fallen out with the Gilbert O'Sullivan society. Instead he has joined the Babes in the Wood Pantomime Society, in which he will play Widow Twankey, cleverly adapting his Yum Yum outfit to be more Chinese and less alluring.

June 15 2023

This is my Report.

Heavy acid precipitation in the Ienstien Highlands today caused sub surface erosion in a highly alkaline district sending 200 U.S. pitchblende prospector's to a gristly death as their bodies were dizzolved by Acid Quicksand. I have drawn a picture. In order to stop this happening to us, our town foundations are being protected by an Inert Compound, private sector fund's for which should be forth coming by the beginning of 2030. In the meantime we are all going around on big snowshoes and not carrying out any unecesary digging work.

My Father has joined a Political Movement. He is part of the Campain for Free Air. Miss Day says every citizen in our Colony pays a Life Support Tax which is deducted from their week's pay and goes to pay mostly for clean air and water. This means we pay more tax than citizens of other places in England, like, e.g., Merther Tidfill, because Merther Tidfill is not heavily contaminated by sulphur and carbon dioxide. My Dad also thinks we should not have to pay National Insurance to subsidize Old and Unemployed people because we have a low level of Unemployment here in Hawking Colony, and we also have no people over 65. Today the Campain for Free Air held a Branson Tea Party, and my Dad threw cylinders of pressurized nitrogen into a garbage crusher dressed as Pocahontas. Some of the nitrogen cylinders exploded and shot pressurized nitrogen out through the garbage system! A lady who had been At Her Stool with a bad case of dyarrhia was taken to hospital with the Bend's.

Today we did Basic Human Decency, which is part of the new National Curriculum. Apparently it is wrong to covet my Neighbors Ass. I do not know what coveting is. Afkap Davis says it is what happens when one horse climb's on top of another and they make a little horse, which is ridiculous, because that is just SHAGGING.

June 16 2023

Dear Mr Dowdeswell

As we discussed on the telephone, I'm afraid I must report that Jordan has learned certain obscenities and is using them freely among his classmates. This is a disruptive influence and I would not wish it to continue. He is a bright child, but must not allow his intelligence to be redirected by peer pressure towards destructive ends. Upon questioning several other children, I discovered that yesterday's school report (copy enclosed) had in fact been a group effort, and that Jordan had been bribed with plumbing washers to spur him to the act. As you may know, plumbing washers of centrifugally-cast type have become

a form of currency among the children, as they can't be locally cast and have to be imported; in our universe, relativistic effects break the castings. However, in the final analysis it is Jordan's own school record which will suffer.

Yours

Eleanor Day (Miss)
IC Positive Gestalt Nurture

June 22 2023

This is my Report.

My Father is a hero! The Gate to Corby, Northamptonshire has been blocked by an Essential Vitamin Truck pushed over on it's side, and the Military Gate to Aldershot is now the only Gate supplies can come thro'. This mean's that we have cut off all supplies of food, diesel, and centrifugal castings from entering our Colony. Hurrah!

Troop's have been firing Plastic Bullets. Apparently they are easy to dodge, because they do not travel faster than a few hundred kilometer's per hour. Only the blue one's are dangerous, because they are coming towards you. They weigh several kilo's if they hit, tho', so they will still take off your head. I would have drawn a bigger picture only I ran out of red. Our gallant Colonial Minutemen have been singlehandedly driving the government Greencoats away with knotted ties and length's of rope according to a pirat radio station today, and I was most surprised to learn that our Prime Minister was a Running Pig Monetarist Dog.

I must report that I have been led astray by sinister forces of juvenile deliquescence. In an effort to conform to my new peer group, I put my future education in jeopardy by writing the word SHAGGING in boldfaced 42-point capital's in my previous report (see over). I can only attribute this to the brutel gravity-tie-whipping I underwent as an "Old Cuntry Boy" in the showers in my first week in school here. I previously did not want to divulge this due to a deep, seated sense of shame and injured masculinity. I am deeply sorry and hope this does not lead me down the slipery slope to writing such word's as PENIS and VALVU.

June 23 2023

Dear Mr Dowdeswell

I am afraid that Jordan has once again been using words that he should not. Furthermore, he has been teaching obscenities to the other students that are not only vile, but also incorrect. I do not have, nor have I ever had, a "valvu."

I am sorry to hear of your recent incarceration and hope you return to freedom soon.

Yours

Eleanor Day (Miss)
IC Positive Gestalt Nurture

June 29 2023

This is my Report. Today we did Sex Education. We have been told not to have Sex with each other under any circumstances. Sex is a thing which only happens in the Old

Country, where lightspeed is fast enough to allow the human heart to safely beat at 200 beats a minute. In our universe, having what is called an Orgasm causes what is called Cardiac Arithmia. It is judged safe for us to be here as we are all below the Age of Pubescence. However, our Teacher and a Doctor who came into our class told us to all be careful if we began to have Urges. If we get Urges we will all have to go back to the Old Country to a special school until we get married and cease to have Sex. Miss Day (who is a comited Christian) said it was quite possible to live a happy and fulfilled life as e.g. a school teacher without sex by using goverment hormone tablets and taking up other diverting pursuits such as long walks in safe goverment-approved snowshoes. Tonight I asked my mother whether she us'd hormones. She said no, she and my father had not needed hormones for a very long time.

Mr Smith was at our house fixing our Water Irradiator for over eight hours today. He said it was a very long job. I have seen Mrs Smith. She is very ugly. I am very glad, as this prove's I am not yet having Urges about her.

My Father has been arrested. I am very proud of him. He was dragg'd away from a Protest amid screams from the other Protestants. He was dressed as Britannia, in a frock onto whom he sew'd all the Sequins himself, and tickled the arresting officers with his cardboard trident before they beat him senseless with rubber truncheons. He told them to Hit Him Harder, Big Boy. So they did.

July 2 2023

This is my Report; I am very sad.

My Father has died in police custody. The police officer who was interviewed on BBC Universe Service said Minimum Force had been used. I do not know what Minimum Force is, but it sounds horribly violent. He was given mussel-relaxing drugs which gave him a Cardiac Arithmia and killed him. The police claim'd that a illegal drug call'd Amil Nitrate was found in his blood stream, but this is ridiculous as my Father always said drugs were bad.

Today, I was a hero. Men from the Campain For Free Air, which has now renamed itself the Daughters of the Bransonian Revolution, lifted me on their brawny sholders and paraded outside the Police Station singing rude songs about Helmets. They were all wearing polka-dotted Shirley Temple dresse's like the one my Father used to wear to sing Party Pieces in solidarity.

We have all bin issued Passports, which have bin printed on new analog printing presses. The goverment want's all printing to take place on it's side of the Corby Gate, because it says computer equipment which is needed in modern printers will not function on our side, but *we* know better. A free news paper has bin issued, which is the *Branson Spart*, which has lots of advertisements in it for cheap diesel, guns and diamonds from the Uhuru Gate, which is only a hundred miles away and opens into Johannesburg. There was also an advertisement advertising Lovely Women From Africa Who Want Friendship Correspondence and Mariage. My Mother says all these things are illegal, and the Africans are taking

advantage of the breakdown of law and order.

The BBC said today that a government soldier had been killed with a Sub Machine Gun firing low-velocity bullet's that were made to expand on impact. I think that is jolly good. I have drawn a picture of my father killing a government soldier in a dress.

July 9 2023

This is my Report. Today, we have a Gypsy Encampment! Travellers have not previously been allowed through our Gate which opens into Corby, North Hampshire, but the other side of the Gate has been seized by what a Government Minister describes as "violent elements who just want to cause trouble," who are freinds of our Daughters of the Bransonian Revolution and some of them have come through the Gate and say they want to stay here, and the Daughters of the Revolution have said, Whoa There. My Mother says these are not *real* gypsies, but just tinkers and hippies who have no understanding of the Real Gypsy Lifestyle. Mr Romano, Mr Stanniwx, and Mr Lee, however, are very nice gentlemen who are currently camping out in the Multistorey Vehicle Park in the centre of town next to the Branson Centre. I attempted to buy sprigs of Lucky Gypsy Heather from their good lady wives, and they told me very good-naturedly to Fuck Off, Kid, We Don't Do That Any More. Many of our Daughters of the Revolution have, however, been in Mr Stanniwx's caravan buying other things in rolls of carpet and brown paper bag's. One of the Travellers caravan's camped out in the town square in front of the Holographic Stonehenge Garden, and its roof was not Hilaria-Adapted and three of their children dizzolved in the rain.

I am still a Hot Property on the Public Relations Market. My picture is in the *Branson Spart* where I am described as *Tragic Bereaved Jordan*. This week we got into my Uncle Dave's Audi Otto and traveled 100 miles to Mandelaville, which is the colony around Uhuru Gate, where I was interviewed by French and American press representatives who are not being allowed into Corby Gate by our perfidious goverment. Uncle Dave took me because he is black, and sometimes the border guards shoot you if you are not black. I am pretty sure Uncle Dave – who is not my real Uncle, otherwise I would be a sort of off black color – is a Last Minuter, because he display's a shocking lack of knowledge of basic particle physic's, and my Dad used to say many black people were included in the Eeyou Quota just in order to be Politically Correct. Uncle Dave is a paleentologist. He is interested in the Heptet fossils that get found in the Great Plains beyond the Fairy Ring Tunnel. Heptet's were softbodied creatures that used to live here before the atmosphere began to heat up. Hilaria has bin heating up slowly since it's Escape Velocity exceeded C about ten milion year's ago, since no heat can escape thro' the Event Horizon. A hundred thousand year's ago, Hilaria was like Earth. In another 10,000 year's, it will be like Venus. There are international plans a foot to make thousands of Gate's that lead here from the Moon and cool Hilaria down.

My Uncle Dave says no real fosils exist of Heptets, only trace's of where the Heptet has bin in the rock due to the

driving of carbonates from the rock's by the increasing acidity and atmospheric pressure, and some people dispute the fact that they are real animal's. However, it is certain that there were microbial life forms here before people, as the terrible Vaginal Thrush Epidemic of 2021 testifies. All our womenfolk must now take regular suppositories, which look terrible things to swallow.

We cross'd part of the Great Toroid Plain. There were lightening storm's, and we were glad of our vehicle's earthing spike. The lightening in the Great Toroid Plain is mostly in aquafortis hurricanes; there is real rain in the high cloud's on Hilaria, but most of it boils away before it reaches the ground. There is forked lightening that goe's both up, down and sideways, sheet lightening, and wierd type's of blue-white ball lightening that flash across the sky like jets. We pass'd a Volkswagen Camper Van that had a hull which was completely un-Hilaria-Adapted and filled with acid holes. It had bin hit by lightening and blew up. It was pointing in the direction of Branson. Uncle Dave said it had probably been filled with African people trying to get into Britain the Long Way Round.

Mandelaville is a big place, but there are few houses. Uncle Dave says most people live in Condominia, wher-ever that is. The police carry guns and drive armoured cars. There are big Corporate Headquarter's everywhere. We stopped at the local office of CNN, which is in a big building called Jomo Kenyatta House. Uncle Dave was scared because he saw two men in the lobby he said he recognized from Branson. The men were wearing big badges saying AVTOMAT AL AKBAR VISITORS PASS, and looking thro' a brochure entitled *First World Artillery at a Third World Price*. I think maybe they were policemen. I think they recognized Uncle Dave. They looked at each other for a long time. You could have cut the air if you had dropped a pin.

The lobby at Jomo Kenyatta House is full of pieces of African Art that display a fasinating medley of African artistic heritage. South Africa has contributed a model of the *Assegai* nuclear ballistic rocket, and Zimbabwe a life-size talking model of President Mugabe that answers questions on Political Economy. I asked it how many beans made five, and it told me that if bloodshed was necessary to achieve the goal of a fully integrated society, Zimbabwe was equal to the challenge. Uganda had contributed a beautiful display of hand-woven raffia baskets. Uganda is in the third year of its military ocupation by Tanzania. Tanzania had contributed a display of state of the art landmine clearance equipment.

I was interviewed by an American lady from CNN, who walked round the lobby gesturing at potted plant's and saying things like, "Here in the Acid-Swept Fastnesses of Hawking Land," "But the Tragic Faces of the Bereaved Young Tell a Different Story" (here was where I came in, as I was one of the Tragic Bereaved Young), and (this one got said quite a lot) "This Last Tired Whatsit of British Imperialism." I was told that the potted plant's and bemused Uhurans would be taken out later and an impressive computer generated backdrop put in once the video tape had been rushed back to High Speed Space.

When we left the building, Uncle Dave payed a hotel doorman to go to the two men and say they had an urgent telephone call while we snuck out the back. He got under their Land Rover in the car park and connected the aquafortis downpipe to the auxiliary fuel feed! This is a very bad thing to do. Engine's wear down very quickly in our atmosphere, because it often contain's sulfuric acid vapour, so the inside of an engine contain's a device for condensing acid out of the air before the engine sucks it in. Uncle Dave said he reckoned the two men would get about ten miles before their pistons seized. Since then we have not heard hide nor hare of them.

I am riting this in the back of the Audi Otto on the way back to Branson, and Uncle Dave is driving. I will go to sleep soon. I wish my Dad were here.

July 16 2023

This is my Report. I have been incarcerated just like my Father, but was lucky enough to have survived the experience.

The Military Goon's were waiting for us in the Fairy Tunnel thro' the mountains. Uncle Dave said probably the two men he saw in Jomo Kenyatta House had radio'ed ahead. They dragged Uncle Dave out of the car, and no one has seen him since. But a group of Concerned Mothers demonstrated peacefully outside the barracks and arranged my release. The police attempted to poison me during my interment with cups of tea and biscuits, but I bravely refused sustinance. My Mother was in the front row of the demonstration with Mr Smith, holding hands for victory. I am proud of her cunning subterfuge. We will show Authority our civil face today and bite them in the bollox tomorrow. I know I will get in to trouble for inserting such phrase's in my School Report, but the situation demands the B Word.

My Mother took me to an Emergency Meeting of the Proactive Wing of the People's Revolutionary Council, which is what the Daughters of the Bransonian Revolution have renamed themself's, and told them they could cancel their petrol-bombing campain against the Police Headquarter's now, because here I was, safe and sound. They looked very disappointed, but also heartened by the good news that someone had allready agreed to fund their Revolution for a mere 100 per cent stake of all mineral exploitation in Hawking Land forever. Many large green boxe's were being unloaded from the back of a truck. I saw Uncle Alan, who played the Pirate King in the G O'S Society's excelent production of *The Pirate's of Penzance*, shaking hand's with a black man wearing a zebra whom I recognized (the black man, not the zebra). I try'd to warn the People's Revolutionary Council that this was the same man I saw in Jomo Kenyatta Hse, but they said No, This is Mr Mativi From Avtomat Al Akbar, He is Our Very Great Friend Who is Facilitating Our Struggle. Uncle Alan and his freinds had copie's of the same brochure the second man was reading in the lobby. Uncle Alan's brochure was open at "Subsonic Explosive Munitions Developed Specially For Your Infantry-Combat-in-a-Slow-Lightspeed-Environment Needs by Cardoen of Bogota." My Mother asked them whether they

had put as much attention into providing emergency supplie's for the period when our goverment cut off our Food, and Uncle Alan said Butter Only Made Him Fat, and everyone agreed.

Then a man came in from the Passive Wing of the People's Revolutionary Council and berated everyone in the room for giving the Cause a bad name by using Violence and Agresion. Uncle Ian from the Traditional Music Hall Society threatened to shoot him.

I am very tired now and will shortly go to bed.

July 23 2023

This is my Report.

We have hired Mercenaries to do our Dirty Work for us – this is what my mother says. Uncle Ian says we have Affirmed Our Willingness to Implement Change Using Any and Every Means Available. Black men have been arriving who do not speak English, and also truck's bearing many creates of weapons and amunition. I do not know what happened to the troops guarding the Fairy Ring Tunnel, but the truck's must have come from Mandelaville. These black people are not like British black people. They spit in the street and follow our womenfolk around asking to marry them. One of our neighbors, Mr Wilson, who is black himself, told them to stop asking his wife to marry them, because she was allready married, and they stabb'd him with a knife. A spokesman from the Proactive Revolutionary Council, Mr Peters, who was formerly Lord High Executioner of the land of Titty-Poo, called round later and informed us that our Foreign Friends had been severely talked-to by their Commanding Officers and that it would Never Happen Again.

Mrs Smith has gone home to her parents in Acrington. She has told Mr Smith she will not live with him any longer in a place where she feels heavy as a Pregnant Woman all day long and fears for her life. She also confided to my mother that she suspected her husband (who is Mr Smith) had been having an Affair, and she did not know with whom, but if she ever got any proof it would be a divorce, just like that. After she left my mother said that Mrs. Smith was just upset because no African soldier's had asked *her* to marry them, and we laughed.

July 30 2023

We are becoming scared of our African protectors.

Mum has told me not to go out of the close because You Never Know Which Way They Swing. I asked her what she meant and she replied that Buggery is a very comon pastime in Africa and that this was due to Moslem Influence. I find this very confusing because Uncle Said, the Particle Physicist, is a Moslem and I am pretty sure he has never buggered anybody, although his wife sometimes looks as if she is in pain when he is talking fascinatingly about Reconciling Ienstien with Hiesenberg, but you cannot bugger a woman, because there would be no point.

One of the African soldier's was caught flagrant dilecto in the act of raping one of our wommen against her will. While he was still Doing the Vile Act his heart had an arithmia and he dye'd. Mr Smith say's he probably was an Old Cuntry Boy fresh in from Africa who did not know

you can not do such things around here. The African commandant, General Joshua, has pronounced himself appled at this behaviour; he ordered the soldier in question postumously condemned to death in a public address on Spart FM while we were in Sainsburys queing for bread – there are big ques in Sainsburys most days these days – and some of the African soldier's who were there garding the bread sniggered. One of them try'd to touch my mothers bottom, and Mr Smith belted him round the head with a flexible rotating blockage clearance probe he just happened to have on him. The African put his hands on his gun, and we all thought he was going to shoot Mr Smith, but sudenly all the men in the que seemed to be holding pick handles and industrial nailguns and such, and the two soldier's were forced to watch us leave and oh boy, did they watch.

When we got home, Mr Smith said he had had enough and he was going to drive us all back to Corby Gate tomorrow. Hooray for Mr Smith. He may prove to be a man worthy of steping into my father's enormous stiletto's.

July 31 2023

This is my Report. It seem's every one else had the same idea as us today. The road in to Corby Gate was filled with 6x6's, some of them with luggage bolted to the outside of their splash carapace's, even though it was drizzling. However, we could not get out because the the People's Revolutionary Doo-Dah had parked a Californium Tanker across the gate. My Mother said this was very bad, because Californium is an unstable element which is prone to chain reactions if highly energized and could explode in both directions if the Gate is severe'd, or if anyone fires a gun at the tanker or Farts in Its General Direction. Mr Smith says the plumbing on Californium tankers has to be Really Spot On. Uncle Ian, Uncle Alan and Uncle Bill were very apologetic, but said that they could not permit anyone to leave, and that the Gate into Hawking Land was constantly in use for importing Revolutionary Supplies in any case. To emphasize their point, the Education Unit of the People's Revolutionary Army fired over the head's of the crowd, and every one ran away. Some people ran away over other people. Then African soldier's came runing in our direction and we had to abandon the car. The soldier's did not shoot at us much as they seemed more interested in the contents of our automobile's. My Mother said this was because Africa is a very poor country.

Every one was running and we ran as far as the Shopping Centre. Then my Mother was almost run over by a big white Jaguar 10x10, and the car screeched to a halt and the door opened and it was Mr Stanniwix who told us to Get in Quick, and he kindly drove us home, saying that he was Getting Out While the Going Was Good, and that An Honest Arms Dealer Could Not Turn a Euro When He Was Being Undercut by Wogs and Cannibals. Mr Stanniwix said he had had a deal arranged to supply the entire People's Revolutionary Army with automatic weapon's from something he called "Sudanese Army Surplus" until the Africans arived and began handing out brand new rifle's for free. Mr Stanniwix dropped us by our respective house's and asked Mother to remember

him to her Good Lady Husband. My Mother scowled at him as he drove away.

Mr Smith also watched Mr Stanniwix drive off, and said that if he was getting out, he had to have a place to get to, and that this must mean that the Rainbow Vale Tunnel was still ungarded. My Mother said, what good would that do us, as we did not have a car. Mr Smith said, Aha, My Little Cherub, and opened his garage door to reveal something he called a "1990 Reliant Robin," which seemed to have wheels missing. Mr Smith told us to get in and spent a lot of time getting the engine started; I told him that this car had no acidproof monocoock and that we would all be killed, but he kept saying things like "This Baby Doesn't Dissolve in Acid" and fiddling with things he called "clutches" and "chokes." Eventually, the steampowered abomination lurched onto the highway, and we were the laughing stock of the neighbourhood. However, Mr Smith's conveyance worked, and conveyed us down the highway into the Driving Murk.

I am riting this report at speed in the back of Mr Smith's Robin Reliable in my School Rough Book my sentence structure is sufering as there are many pothole's. I wil copy it to my School Report Book as soon as we return to the Warm Boozom of Civilization.

August 1 2023

This is my Report. I am now typing uncorrected English on my school note book and we park'd up under an outcrop off the road last nite, and it was lucky we did. Lot's of big green military vehicles drove past in the direction of Town from Rainbow Vale about 12 pm. Our heart's sank. The Rainbow Vale Gate was already garded. We decided to drive back home, as the Robin Reliable's tires were becoming porous in the acid and a lot of thing's had failed on the car already like e.g. the brakes. We have so far made it to an Emergency Petrol Stop halfway between Town and Rainbow Vale. All the supplies have bin looted; there is no food; there is no fuel.

I am sure there is someone here who isn't us. The building is big and creaky, one of the old prefab ones. When we stopped and parked the car inside the dome, I could hear runing water, and when I went to the water dispenser the tap was boiling hot, but nobody believes me. Mr Smith says this can happen with old water supplie's from the time when tank's were disinfected with bleach, because the acid from outside eats in and causes a Chemical Reaction. Mr Smith will not let us drink the water until he is sure it is safe to do so. This means we have no petrol and no food and no water neither. I am begining to talk like Mr Smith. I will be dropping my aitches soon.

I will probably not sleep very well to-night. I do not know where we are going to go. If the Liberation Army comes this way we are all Brown Bread. *Sliced* Brown Bread, Mr Smith says, judging by the size of those Africans Machetties.

August 2 2023

This is my Report. Uncle Dave is here! He was our Mystery Guest!

After being arrested by the military at the Fairy Ring tunnel, Uncle Dave was interrogated in the back of a truck by the 2 goon's from Jomo Kenyatta House, who were British Government Soldier goon's. In the process of this interrogation he seems to have lost a few teeth and finger nails, but he is still the same old Uncle Dave. When the African mercenary's came thro' the gate, tho', our soldier's waved them thro' as if they were expecting them. Uncle Dave says the African's were hired by the Government to approach the Proactive Wing of the People's Revolutionary Whatnot in order to discredit it. He say's once the British Army move's in the African's will run away and get paid for doing it once the shooting start's. Then our perfidious Government will once again be in charge.

Uncle Dave escape'd by asking his guards to turn the electric fan up in his place of imprisonment. Electric fan's that havent bin modified explode here if the fanblades pass lightspeed. Uncle Dave duck'd behind a Filling Cabinet, but the two gards in the room were badly cut by flying shrapnel.

When he escape'd, Uncle Dave took a rifle with him at first, but then he threw it away in a sulphate bog since he thought anyone finding him with it would kill him. He walk'd from the Fairy Ring to here overland, and was lucky not to get caught in any aquafortis squalls. He had a military poncho and rain hat, tho' he says it leaked in the drizzle where the soldier wearing it had bin wounded. He has a big acid burn down the back of his head where it leaked. When he got here he hid all the spare food and fuel underground and sat down to Wait It Out.

He says he isnt the only person here, and he touche's the side of his nose every now and again as if it itches. I think Uncle Dave has become a bit tapped from his Acid Burn on the Brain.

Anyway, we now have a car, and petrol, but nowhere to go. Mum suggest's we use the polythene sheeting in the emergency stores cupboard to cover the car and park it off road and wait until the Whole Thing Blows Over. Uncle Dave suggests we wait for a PLA armoured car to come past and overpower its large crew of heavily armed profesional soldier's somehow, although he is unclear as to the details of this plan. Mr Smith has bin playing with the pipework in the dome roofspace all morning. I think pipework Turns Him On. He had beter be careful while we drive past the British Californium Works when we get back back to Branson, or he will get an Arithmia.

August 3 2023

We have escaped from Branson, and this is my School Report.

Uncle Dave and Mr Smith were talking all last night, and in the morning they wheeled the Reliant Robin into the Emergency Stop garageway against my mothers protests. They then spent some time constructing a temporary Acid Shelter behind some rocks by the roadside.

After about two hours wait an armoured car arrived with many African soldier's who ran out busting for a No. 1. While they presumably did their No. 1's their vile confederate's backed the armored car in to the Shelter and got out to take a look at the Reliable Robin. They were

probably steam enthusiasts.

Then, a few second's after, they all ran out clutching their faces and fell over screaming. Uncle Dave said Mr Smith had rerouted the building's aquafortis extractor into the water tank and also turn'd off all the stopcocks and unscrewed the fire sprinklers. When the African's found the stopcock and opened it, the fire sprinkler's started up and they Dizzolved in Acid. They were not dead, so Mr Smith went around killing them with a rock. It was not how I thought killing the Enemy would be.

The Armoured Car meanwhile had been acidproofed and was completely unharmed, so Uncle Dave set to siphoning the petrol out of the Reliant and puting it into the Armoured Car.

Then I notic'd that some of the African soldier's Mr Smith was hiting were wearing hand cuffs. I said, Stop, Mr Smith, These Are Prisoner's, Which Implies That Some Where There is Some One We Have Not Yet Hit Over the Head With a Rock Who Was Doing the Imprisoning.

Quite Corect said a voice; and we turn'd round to see the 2 gentlemen we had met in J. K. House, only now they were carrying Guns. One of the gentlemen said he could obviously not rely on setting a Wog to catch a Wog, so he would have to look after this job himself; and he shot Uncle Dave. Then he told us that all the fizzing dizzolving African men and mangled bullet-ridden British bodies on the floor were evidence that the Peoples Revolutionary Doodah had begun to fight even among its self.

My Mother was slow on the uptake and said, What Mangled Bullet-ridden British Bodies, and the Army gentleman tolled her which ones and she collasped weeping. I think I may have called the Army gentleman a Hitler-faced Neo-Thatcherite Runing Nazi Tinpot Milosevich at this point.

Uncle Dave meanwhile was roling around on the floor in great pain. The more pain he apeared to be in, the more the Army gentleman seemed to enjoy ignoring him, and I saw that Uncle Dave was roling in the direction of the Emergency Fire Store Locker, so I shouted Woo Woo, Chase Me, Chase Me, and ran in the other direction. The Army man's attention was detracted while Uncle Dave pulled open the Fire Locker latch, and something red white and blue burst out of it and shot across the room, and the Army gentleman's guts shot after it. The second Army gentleman was unsure how to take this, and Mr Smith helped him out of his indecision by banging him over the head with a tyre-iron.

It seems that Heptet's still exist to-day, and that Uncle Dave had captur'd a Heptet for Scientific Examination, but had not wanted to tell us in case we open'd the Fire Locker to see. He had found out that the Heptet's travel at near light speed, about 800 kilometers per hour, and that Heptet's are the red-and-blue ball lightening always seen in our Hilarious rainstorms. Heptet's also defend themselves by spitting at their enemies at close range. Uncle Dave examin'd the body of the soldier, Lieutenant Durant, and pronounced himself unsure as to whether the spit contain'd dangerous venom as there were too few bits of the Lieutenant left to make a valid scientific judgement.

If we had open'd the door, the Heptet would have escap'd, and we could have endid up like the Lieutenant.

Uncle Dave says he has lost a Noble Prize. He is very sad.

We drove down the road to the Rainbow Vale tunnel and found it garded by *British* soldier's. The Government had not manag'd to clear the Californium Tanker blocking the Corby Gate, but instead had made concessions to the Russians allowing them to shoot Moslems in the revolting central Asian republic of Gorniy Altai. In return the Russians allowed Britain to use the Russians' Gate at Space City, which open's into the Low Sky Hiland's a mere 500 kilometers away from Rainbow Vale. The troop's had bin traveling here for over a week, and the Radspaehpanzer's that pass'd us in the night two days ago were in fact the first contingent of British paratrooper's into Branson. The United Nations are reported to be very cross with our Government, which is good, and I hope they send in a big white UN submarine and Nuke them. The British soldier's were leading away lines of African soldier's looking almost as sad as Uncle Dave.

We hid Uncle Dave in the back of our Armoured Car and claim'd to be Refugees Fleeing Fiting. There were CNN and Red Cross and Medicines Sans Frontiers all around, tho', so although some of the Military Intelligence officers who Debriefed my Mother looked askance at us, we were able to look askance back without fear of recrimination. A nice gentleman from Royters has offered to take us back to Space City Gate in his 8-Trak. He say's

the Japanese have recently discover'd a second setting on the standard Roswell Gate, one that open's in to the heart of another Sun and provide's unlimited energy, or so they deduce from the smoking ruins of their Research Laboratory. Other news is that attitudes are changing with more up-to-date modern attitudes in the States – America's first openly homophobic president has bin elected on a Gay Jean Eradication Ticket. And aparently Cornwall has recently seceded from the Untied Kingdom.

I have had enough of my chosen homeland. I am going back to Earth with a bump by way of Russia. Some day I may return to claim back this country for the Comon Man. As always here, it is chucking it down and we are sheltering indoor's in big military geodesic's. However, it is true what we Hilarian's say about the weather – just wait ten minute's, and it will rain another variety of amphibian.

Dominic Green lives in Northampton, in the English Midlands, and works in computing. His last several stories here – all, in varying degrees, humorous and/or satirical – were "Something Chronic" (issue 159), "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (issue 162), "Grass" (issue 168), "Queen of Hearts" (issue 173) and "Blue Water, Grey Death" (issue 175).

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SECTOR GENERAL: THE NEXT GENERATION?

Gary Westfahl

From one perspective, it is entirely appropriate to have a James White Award for short fiction, since White was unquestionably a expert at the form: the early Sector General books that made him popular were assemblages of novelettes, and later novels written for book publication, like *The Galactic Gourmet* and *Mind Changer*, characteristically took the form of a novella preceded by several vignettes.

Yet White's special talent for short fiction has not been widely acknowledged; instead, his Sector General series gave him the reputation, in the words of blurbmeisters, as "the master of medical science fiction." It is hard to recall another author who so thoroughly dominated a sub-genre: in the 1940s and 1950s, there were many science fiction stories about future physicians, including series from L. Ron Hubbard, Murray Leinster and Joseph A. Winter, M.D., but by the 1960s, White's superior product – a good-natured blend of likable physicians, a huge and variegated space hospital, and a plethora of imaginatively exotic aliens afflicted by strange maladies – had driven away all rivals. Major writers made no effort to compete with White, and minor authors who launched their own series involving space doctors, like Edward Llewellyn, Susan R. Mathews, Jody Lynne Nye and Sharon Webb, never got anywhere, which is why you haven't heard of their heroes.

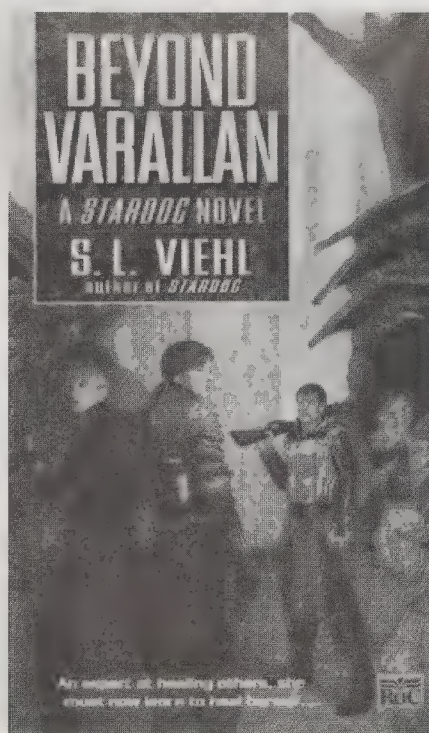
Given his triumphs in the area, then, readers unfamiliar with the James White Award might assume it was designed to recognize writers who were best carrying on White's tradition of medical science fiction. And, if such a James White Award had actually been established, there would today be only one strong contender, S.L. Viehl.

For the record, Viehl insists on her website that she had never heard of White until reviewers began comparing her novels to his work, yet the timing of her emergence inevitably suggests a conscious effort to fill the gap left by his absence. In 1999, White died, and the final Sector General novel, *Double Contact*, was published. In January, 2000, Viehl's *StarDoc* appeared, the first in a series of four novels to date featuring, like the Sector General series, a dedicated doctor in a spacefaring future society filled with colourful aliens. Further, while no smoking guns prove Viehl's testimony was inaccurate, some aspects of *StarDoc* debatably imply some awareness of White: the novel's intelligent bacter-

ial plague is not unlike the menace in White's *Final Diagnosis*, and while White featured a kindly alien physician who resembled a giant fly, *StarDoc* features a kindly alien physician who resembles a giant spider.

More broadly, *StarDoc* invites analysis as a deliberate attempt to update White, to offer a grittier, more contemporary version of the Sector General series. First, although Viehl's biographical statement is coyly vague about her "medical experience" in "military and civilian trauma centres," she surely has had such experience, since her accounts of emergency-room medicine have an aura of authenticity that White never quite mustered. Other transformations of White's template seem ideal for today's more diverse, and more cynical, society. Instead of a bland white male, Dr Conway, we have a feisty Native American woman, Dr Cherijo Grey Veil. Instead of the meticulously well-maintained and lavishly well-equipped Sector Twelve General Hospital, we have a seedy, rundown Free Clinic on a newly colonized planet, where doctors make do with antiquated machinery and inadequate supplies. Instead of a benign space federation doing everything in its power to promptly respond to medical emergencies, we have inefficient bureaucracies that are indifferent or inimical to the efforts of medical personnel.

Viehl also is arguably providing a fuller, more accurate portrait of the medical profession than White. In Sector General stories, doctors came only in various shades of saintliness, from moderate to extreme. In *StarDoc*, although the energetic, idealistic Cherijo would make a perfect addition to the Sector General staff, her father, the brilliant but sinister medical researcher Joseph Grey Veil, provides

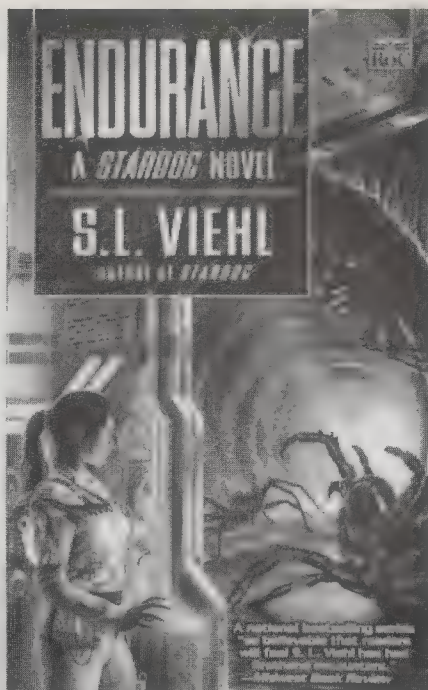


a sharp contrast; first presented only as a cold, domineering parent, Joseph emerges as a futuristic Frankenstein aggressively seeking to regain control of his “daughter” Cherijo, who is actually a genetically-engineered clone created as part of his megalomaniacal plot to father a race of superbeings. In the third *StarDoc* novel, *Endurance*, we encounter another evil physician, the Mengele-like alien SrokVar, who delights in torturing patients.

Yet villainous, sadistic doctors, despite their conspicuous absence in Sector General stories, hardly represent an innovation in science fiction; Viehl more strikingly includes characters who are simply lousy doctors, going through the motions unconcerned about whether they are misdiagnosing a patient or providing the wrong treatment. One of Cherijo’s colleagues in *StarDoc* is an indolent half-alien who almost kills one patient and takes naps while sick people urgently need assistance; the fourth *StarDoc* novel, *Shockball*, features a slacker she met in medical school who profits by selling addictive drugs instead of effective medication to poor patients. One could say that in contrast to White, Viehl is confronting all aspects of contemporary medicine – the good, the bad and the ugly.

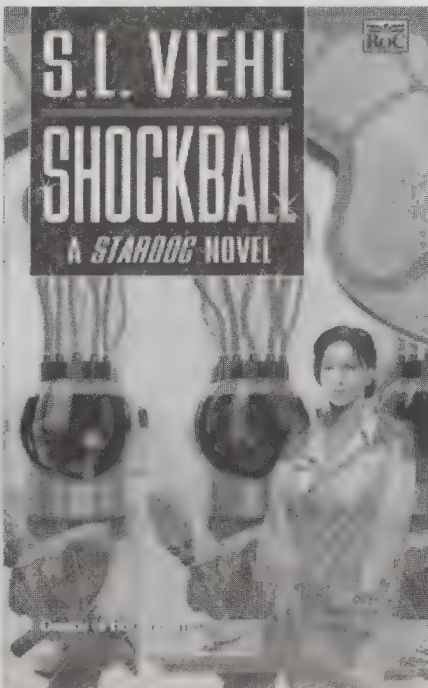
In *StarDoc*, Cherijo adjusts to her clinic, makes some interesting friends, and stops a devastating planetary plague which unfortunately kills her new husband, the blue-skinned alien Kao Torin. It is a pleasant, involving novel that seems a promising start to a new series of medical adventures in the Sector General tradition. However, what happens in later *StarDoc* novels raises serious questions about Viehl’s status as White’s successor, and about the future of medical science fiction in general.

For Cherijo, it turns out, is not simply a skilful surgeon, but also a marvel of future medicine – blessed with remarkably rapid healing powers that provide virtual immortality – and also an experiment Joseph has been unable to duplicate. To get this valuable creation back to his laboratory, Joseph stops kidding around with stern parental messages and arranges to have Cherijo declared “non-sentient” because she is a clone, legally making her his property, and further offers such a huge reward for her capture that innumerable scoundrels are soon hot on her trail. In the second *StarDoc* novel, *Beyond Varallan*, the focus of attention resultingly begins shifting from Cherijo’s efforts to cure the sick to Cherijo’s efforts to avoid death or imprisonment. Embraced by the extended clan of her late husband and welcomed aboard their starship, she endeavours to work as a shipboard physician while periodically having



her clinic battered by missile attacks or suffering assaults from a mysterious murderer lurking on board.

By the time we get to *Endurance*, Cherijo’s increasingly violent and illogical adventures are recalling the Perils of Pauline. Seized by loathsome reptilian aliens, the Hsktskt, Cherijo is officially enslaved and taken to a prison colony, where various contrivances lead her through cycles of alternately heading the prison clinic, spending days in solitary confinement, and being tortured by SrokVar. However, it is in *Shockball* that her story begins to provoke unintentional giggles. Captured by Joseph, Cherijo and her second husband, telepathic linguist Duncan Reeve, are taken to Earth and imprisoned in his impreg-



nable, state-of-the-art home/fortress/laboratory, from which they are promptly abducted by unknown allies. (Later, after Cherijo voluntarily returns to the laboratory to seek medical help for her husband, they are again effortlessly snatched from this stronghold within one day.) They join a tribe of Native Americans who secretly carry on a traditional Indian lifestyle in underground caverns; but every week, some of these surreptitious savages travel to the surface to be part of a famous professional shockball team, playing that vicious and popular game to hordes of enthusiastic spectators on their way to a world championship game before they slip back into their unknown underground world with no questions asked. Cherijo has been kidnapped because tribal leader and team owner Rico needs a doctor to help conceal the fact that some players are illegal, half-alien hybrids, although how their alien nature would go unnoticed even with medical tomfoolery, and why he chose the world’s most conspicuous fugitive for the task instead of bribing some down-and-out doctor, remain unexplained. When the team needs another player, Cherijo’s husband is dragooned into uniform and, despite having displayed no previous signs of athletic abilities or knowledge of the game, he immediately becomes the team’s new star player, without anyone observing that he is the husband of the world’s most conspicuous fugitive. Don’t even ask how the five-foot-high Cherijo ends up on the playing field disguised as one of Duncan’s muscular male teammates during the climactic game, and did I mention that Rico is also Cherijo’s hitherto-unknown brother, which is why he keeps trying to kill her? In the face of such absurdities, even the strongest of wills cannot suspend disbelief.

Even more disturbing than these novels’ senselessness are their sado-masochistic elements. It is not simply that Cherijo is more than a little accident-prone, constantly suffering bumps, bruises and burns that cause her considerable pain, or that she is occasionally brutalized by malevolent experimenters, but rather that she is regularly attacked by men who are close to her, even men whom she loves, whose assaults are implausibly excused after the fact. In *StarDoc*, she is abruptly raped by future husband Duncan – his behaviour later revealed as a response to mental commands from the sentient disease controlling his body, although by the end of the rape she was starting to enjoy it anyway. In *Beyond Varallan*, the brother of her late husband undertakes to shield her from harm while at times losing his temper and hurling her

across the room – his behaviour eventually attributed to drugs slipped into his diet by the shipboard murderer. In *Endurance*, Duncan suddenly appears in the uniform of a Hsktskt officer, revealed as a former friend of those cruel aliens now welcomed into their hierarchy, and in his new role personally wields the laser that painfully burns the mark of a slave into her arm – his behaviour excused when Cherijo learns he has also been clandestinely working to free some Hsktskt slaves. In *Shockball*, Rico regularly attacks his sister, once throwing her off a cliff – his behaviour finally depicted as a result of syphilis-induced insanity. Viehl can offer all the justifications she likes, but the deep structure of her heroine's life is all too apparent: Cherijo hangs around with men who like to beat her up, and she keeps coming back for more.

Perhaps this can be defended as another aspect of Viehl's expanded commentary on contemporary medicine, an argument that medicine is supremely a discipline of pain, in which doctors regularly inflict pain and have pain inflicted upon them, and thus a discipline naturally attractive to sadists and masochists. However, I suspect that this violence against women stems from a commen-

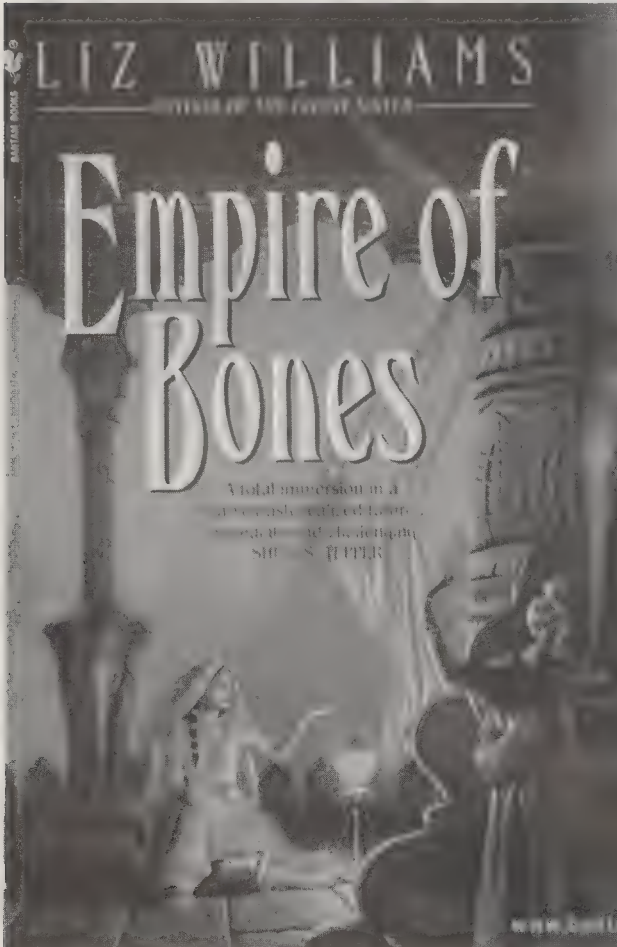
tary on medicine of a different kind: namely, Viehl's lack of confidence in medical science fiction as a sub-genre.

Unlike readers of White's generation, she evidently believes, modern readers won't be satisfied with leisurely-paced stories of human and alien doctors who calmly ingest synthetic steaks and spaghetti in the hospital cafeteria while discussing the mysterious ailment of the porpoise-like alien on level 16; instead, they require a doctor who is simultaneously a capable surgeon, invulnerable warrior and human target, a doctor who must hurriedly squeeze in her operations between bloody fistfights and desperate escapes with occasional pauses for graphic sexual encounters. And who is to say she is incorrect? With four novels in print and a fifth on the way, her StarDoc series has already lasted longer than any other rival to Sector General, suggesting that Viehl may have indeed improved upon White's formula. Then again, White's stately procession of medical mysteries kept his series alive for four decades, and enjoyed its greatest success in the 1990s, whereas Viehl's hyperactive shenanigans, if continued at their current pace, will likely exhaust both their author and their readers well before the year 2040.

At the moment, Cherijo's career seems at a crossroads; *Shockball* ends with the murder of the menacing Joseph, and Cherijo, her husband and new daughter are returning to space to see old friends and voyage to the homeworld of the alien woman who raised her. Perhaps this means she will be settling into a more sedate existence resembling Dr Conway's, her life centred more on doctoring than on derring-do as she awaits the shocking-to-all-but-attentive-readers revelation that she is not merely a clone, but a half-alien to boot. But she may simply be resting up before another round of mayhem and melodrama, and if her life ever gets too serene, the purportedly deceased Joseph may again rear his repulsive head. (Science fiction readers should *never* be entirely sure about the death of a character with a demonstrated ability to clone himself.)

While Viehl's fans await news of Cherijo's coming exploits, however, I must confess that I still prefer the old Sector General series to the updated version, and I currently look forward to reading the two Sector General books I haven't gotten around to yet – *Ambulance Ship* and *Code Blue: Emergency* – far more than I look forward to reading another StarDoc novel.

Gary Westfahl



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RODDENBERRY'S CHILDREN

Enterprise: Starship NX-01 "Enterprise"

MEDIA + AND + TELEVISION + COMMENTARY + FROM + EVELYN + LEWES

Colossus-like, Gene Roddenberry towers over science fiction. With the original *Star Trek* series, he gave us comparatively serious adult science fiction on television, where before we had had to put up with avowedly children's programmes – the likes of *Lost in Space*, *Time Tunnel*, *Fireball XL5* and *Thunderbirds*. Even *Dr Who* is feeble kids' stuff in comparison (it is also debatable as to how much science fiction actually featured in its story-lines – it always seemed to be more horror-dressed-up-as-sci-fi, but could we honestly imagine anyone encouraging their kiddywinks to sit down and watch the BBC's latest horror show?). And while there have been many excellent British one-off dramas and serials that cater to an adult audience for science fiction – from *Quatermass* and *A for Andromeda*, through *The Year of the Sex Olympics*, *The Stone Tape* and *Survivors* right up to the recent *Invasion: Earth* – they have always had the trade-mark British down-beat accent that ensures they will never be massive popular successes in the US of A market that is so vital to any show's continued existence.

Despite its apparent failure – it was almost pulled after two series, and limped on for one further series before finally being cancelled – the quality of good adult-oriented up-beat science fiction that characterized the classic *Star Trek* episodes, plus the extremely vocal cult following that sprang up around it, persuaded Paramount to invest in a

revival of it, set further into the future so that a whole new gamut of special effects and futuristic designs could have play, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (ST:TNG) finally appeared in 1987. Despite its one huge flaw, the character "Q" (played by John de Lancie) whose introduction in the pilot episode and subsequent frequent reappearances through the entire series successfully undercut the whole science fiction ethos of the show (so much so that I still cringe if I see John de Lancie's face on screen, fine actor though he is), it was so successful it ran for seven seasons, and gave rise to the spin-offs *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (ST:DS9) and *Star Trek: Voyager* (ST:V), each with Roddenberry's name proudly attached as some kind of Executive Producer. These also ran their allotted courses of seven seasons, but got duller and duller as their protagonists became more stereotypically worthy or outlandish while exhibiting fewer of the kind of believable realistic character traits that might engage an audience of actual people. As strongly-delineated characters became fewer and farther between and more notable simply for their presence among so many caricatures, I've always felt it significant that Jonathan Frakes went on to direct so much *Star Trek* product when his was the only cardboard character in ST:TNG. Cisko, Dax and Odo in ST:DS9 stood out in contrast to hold-overs from ST:TNG such as O'Brien and Worf, and the

newly-introduced ciphers Quark, Major Bajor (or whatever she's called) and Cisko's sickening son, who does nothing beyond embody every parent's deepest worries about their errant children. By the time we get to ST:V, the only real characters are the incidentals, Kes and the holographic doctor: and the actors of these two parts must themselves have felt like they were moving through some kind of holographic drama, as the substanceless pre-recorded ghosts around them trotted out their standard lines every week. When Kes was written out of the series (if the rumours are true as to why, then they give weight to my opinion above, but I can't repeat them here for fear of committing slander), for the first and only time in my life I went from avidly watching to actively avoiding a science-fiction television show.

Along with this degrading of the characterization, there was a concomitant and perhaps related degradation of the mission, and with it of the sense of wonder that for me is the most vital part of any sf. Where *Star Trek* was actually sold as a kind of *Wagon Train* in space and ST:TNG followed on the same idea, with ST:DS9 the outward urge was gone, and the programme became static, centring on a base, a planet and a wormhole rather than a ship – of course, they did lots of exploring of the gamma quadrant through the wormhole using their new warp-capable shuttles, but this wasn't the prime focus of the show any more. Closing the circle,

ST:V actually turned the whole ethos on its head – while setting off to see what was out there, it got so far out it was out of its depth, and spent its entire time trying to get home. Is it any wonder *ET: The Extraterrestrial* has been revived, with this kind of retrenchment ruling popular television?

It always seemed to me that what I really would have pleased the audience (i.e. people like me) would have been to have made the next *Star Trek* a further quantum leap into the future after ST:TNG; not 200 years further into the future, but 2,000! It seems Roddenberry had a similar idea, because after he died his widow, Majel Barrett-Roddenberry, made great efforts to get his two remaining projects onto the screen. One of them was *Andromeda*. Now I wrote at length about *Andromeda* in *IZ* #165, and it is sad to report that, despite the continued excellence of some of the supporting characters – in particular, in one episode Lexa Doig gets to play all three manifestations of the ship in one scene, to great effect – Kevin Sorbo is still too wooden as the lead character. It is plain that the powers-that-be chose Sorbo to try to pull in an audience by familiar-face-power rather than trusting to the strength of the stories and the acting. As such, he is the show's greatest liability (although the studio heads are challenging him for poll position).

Instead of giving the writers their head and finding out where you could go in such a strange and altered (and wonderful!) universe, what do we get? First of all, we get Captain Dylan Hunt trying to rebuild the Commonwealth single-handed (although aided by having the most powerful ship in the known universe on his side) and thus revisiting the error in plotting of ST:V by trying to go back rather than trying to go out; then we get an overall scenario building where the big problem to be solved is the threat to civilization of being overrun by ravening hordes of mindless warriors. Well excuse me for thinking that civilization had already collapsed. Isn't that what the Nietzschean treachery all those years ago precipitated? Whatever happened to sense of wonder? Whatever happened to the reliable old science-fiction cliché of trying to imagine something plausible that had never happened before? The writers were plainly casting around for a focal point that would satisfy the studio heads, and have finally settled on a good old-fashioned black-as-your-hat baddie with super powers, which makes the show's early attempts at subtlety, and thus adult interest – the philosophical opening quotations, the witty name-games – no more than

signposts to a future that was never going to be. Say it with me: "Puh-lease!" The studio's fiddling while the Rome of its vision burns is nowhere better symbolized than by dedicating a whole episode to how Trance Gemini lost her tail. Of all the aspects of Trance that are fascinating – she is a purple sparkly alien woman who apparently has deep insight into other people and might just be superhuman in some aspects; she carries the torch of being what I've termed elsewhere the rag-doll woman (Priss in *Bladerunner*, Chiana in *Farscape*, Kes in ST:V) who is often overlooked because of her superficial attractiveness but has hidden depths and qualities; that she also has a tail is the least significant, unless they are going to parlay up this loss of tail into something much more meaningful later on.

Studio-meddling with the production to try to make it a more saleable product has also become noticeable in the other post-mortem Roddenberry show, *Earth: Final Conflict*. Here, the aliens, Taelons, have arrived on Earth, and are busy doling out the fruits of their more advanced technology, although to what end is initially opaque. Most Earth governments are co-operating, but there is a resistance. Enter an honest cop, William Boone, whom the Taelons want to recruit as head of their security effort. He is also approached by the resistance who want him to take the job, but as their insider. When he turns both down because he wants to raise a family and fears this will interfere, and anyway he is happy where he works now, his wife is murdered. As a result he takes the job, but primarily to try to discover which side murdered his wife. The startling ambiguity that this situation explores is the first really adult thing I had seen in sf on television for a long time, and briefly it became addictive to watch Boone each week walking the tightrope between the two factions while trusting neither. What became even more fascinating was the way in which this ambiguity, which couldn't be maintained indefinitely, was shading over into a close working relationship between Boone, and the Taelon he was closest to, Da'an: where it was gradually becoming clear to Boone that Da'an wasn't an invading monster but a person who cared about their responsibility and the pain it could inflict, Da'an was meanwhile coming to see Boone not as a subservient lesser entity but a person every bit as intelligent as the supposedly more advance Taelons – interestingly, the Taelons are played by women costumed to appear androgynously alien, and Da'an is a particular triumph in appearing completely other, so that the gender of the actor was simply not clear, and cleverly

was kept impossible to discern from the titles. This played particularly well against Boone's wholesome unhunkiness – he has a fine strong nose, but this might be seen as less attractive by some viewers. To see these two characters sparring verbally and without gender role undertones was spell-binding.

Sadly, Boone's wonderful subtlety, along with his appalling dress sense and his lack of manly sex-appeal were to trigger his elimination, and it appears he was written out of the series to make way for a younger, sexier, and altogether more cosmetic young man in a leather jacket. *Earth: Final Conflict* continued to decline in quality, and although the real focus of interest was lost at the point Boone was replaced, soon enough this lost interest led to missed episodes, losing of the thread, and final abandonment of trying. By accident, I caught the finale of, I think, series 3 last year, and, as it looked like the culmination of the entire story, I decided to watch the whole series through when it began to rerun (I now discover that it has gone to five series in North America, with an almost completely new cast, but have not been able to find any plans to show these later episodes in the UK); but given that it confirmed itself as less than compelling viewing, and the channels keep moving programmes from their expected slots, I have been less than successful.

Moving a programme from its regular slot either tests the loyalty or the perseverance of, or marks the complete contempt of the programme-schedulers for, its audience. I'm not an addict, or a fan, nor even an assiduous watcher of television. There is very little that I do enjoy, and most of that is in the sf arena. But none of it grips me enough to make me run home to watch it, or struggle with the video to record it (I've got cupboards full of unwatched videos). But, strolling home from the allotment of a Sunday afternoon, it was good to think we could sit down to a lazy dinner, then have a post-prandial semi-doze in front of *Earth: Final Conflict*. Imagine our mild dismay when turning on the TV on one such occasion to find that the programme had been moved back an hour and we were presented with some *Ghost-busters* / *Blair Witch Project* spin-off twaddle called *Freaky-links*. Given a stunningly ordinary retelling of the Sawney Bean myth in an American city, lots of mystic mumbo-jumbo and hand-held camera-work, and characters who don't appear to understand the concept of self-preservation, I was less than impressed, and in fact turned off half way through the second episode I tried to watch. Don't expect me to watch any more of this for you, dear readers. It

has no redeeming qualities, and goes in the visual dustbin along with *Sliders* (a dismal reworking of Irwin Allen's already dismal *Time Tunnel*), *Stargate* (known in this house as *Bungholes in Space*) and *Space Precinct* (Gerry Anderson is such a consistent disgrace to all forms of life everywhere, including puppets, he should have his right to be one confiscated).

A programme needs to be on at the same time on the same day of the week for its entire run. When it is moved – which has happened with almost everything I watch – I either lose track of the ongoing story, or lose track of the programme altogether (*Third Rock from the Sun* was a favourite, but despite the introduction of William Shatner as the Big Giant Head, I never managed to keep up with its slot moves on Sky One, and now it appears to have finally signed off after six series – if ever something deserved a DVD release, this did, and yet it languishes almost uncollected even on video).

Why schedulers move programmes from their regular slots I can only speculate: but it seems to me it's one way of getting a regular audience to watch at least one episode of something new. There is a regrettable tendency among broadcasters at the moment to spend endless amounts of time cajoling and browbeating us to watch their other offerings – trailers for other programmes during advert breaks in the one you're watching, voiceovers and pictures over the credit sequence, and now this rescheduling of a different new programme in the slot where you do watch, while completely disregarding the fact that you actually want to watch the programme you tuned in for. Well, all it has achieved is to drive this regular viewer away. I wonder how many more viewers they will lose before they realize this.

A particular gripe about this is that over Easter the Hallmark channel showed a wonderful two-part modern re-telling of a fairytale, *Jack and the Beanstalk: The True Story*. I can tell

you very little about this other than it was wonderful, and starred (among others) Vanessa Redgrave, Darryl Hannah and Richard Attenborough, and was made by Henson Movies (so looked uncomfortably like *Farscape* in places), because they minimized and talked over all the credits, they don't answer my e-mails, their web site only had the previous week's programming displayed, and the Henson web-site was "under construction" every time I looked. This was one of a series of such shows – I missed the *Prince Charming* starring Billy Connolly because I was busy watching *Enterprise*, and there have been other such apparently high-profile ventures that I can find no information about. Let's hope these retold fairytale films show up on one of the "proper" channels soon so you can all enjoy them and I can get some more information. Again, these are crying out for video and DVD release if they're not going to be shown on terrestrial TV.

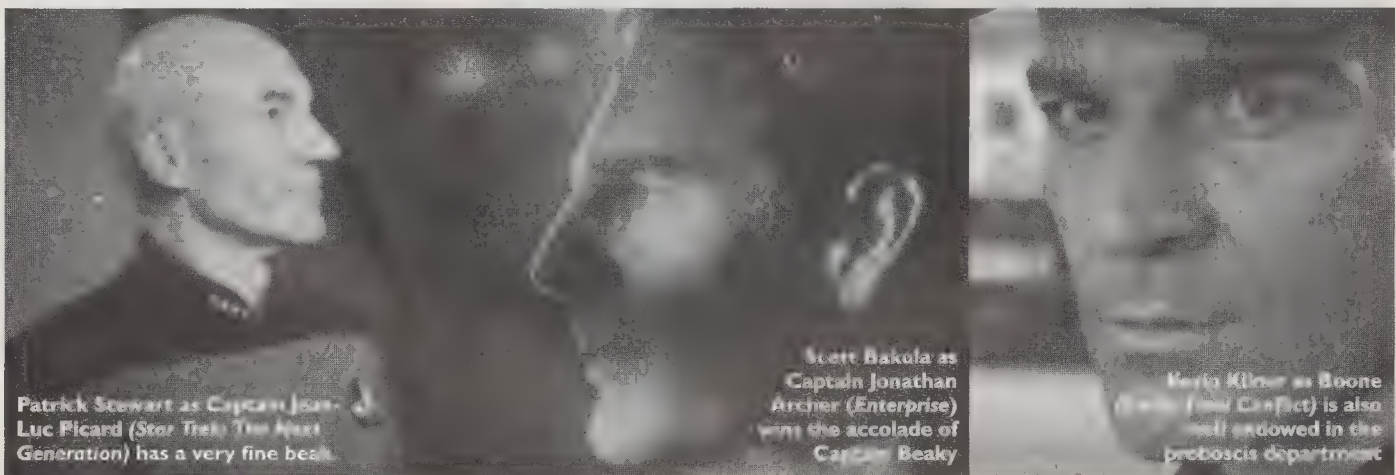
Meantime, one programme that does stick to its slot – the schedulers at Sky One would be insane to move it – is *Enterprise*. This latest in the *Star Trek* franchise is most notable for not bearing the name *Star Trek*, despite being predicated as a direct precursor to the original classic *Star Trek* – but they have kept the ship's name, and the unfortunate upshot of this is that by transference I keep thinking that the show is called *Endeavour* – so if I type the wrong name hereinafter, please forgive my failing synapses.

The next and most striking change here is abandoning the instrumental signature tune in favour of a dirge-like song-of-inspiration (yes, that's *supposed* to be an oxy-moron) that wouldn't sound out of place in a "best of the 1970s" middle-of-the-road music compilation, complete with smokey passionate voice, wailing guitar and portentous-but-meaningless lyrics. This accompanies an alarming visual travesty of aviation history where genuine and (dare I say it? yes, I dare)

uplifting events of exploratory importance – the first flight of the Wright flyer, Amy Johnson's departure, Lindbergh's Spirit of St Louis, and the Bell X-1 in flight – are patched seamlessly into space exploration footage, simulation footage of the currently projected spaceplane and station, the launch of humanity's first warp drive (from the film *Star Trek: First Contact*), and the first venturing forth of the prequel-eponymous starship *Enterprise*. While this is all good fun for those of us who know the difference, this blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction can be quite disconcerting. As with drama documentaries, anyone watching them who already knows what's what won't have any trouble, but people who might watch them to gain information will get very confused. This curate's egg of an opening, blending fact and fiction, uplift and tedium, in pictures and theme tune, does not bode well for the series.

I have to say that the shows themselves are not nearly as bad as this led me to expect. However, neither are they as good as I had hoped. The first great mistake is Scott Bakula. Continuing in the tradition of importing a no-hoper with a familiar face from another long-running sci-fi series, Bakula comes all agog from the long-running *Quantum Leap*, another programme that was so awesomely bad that I forewent the opportunity to watch it so long ago that I can't even remember when it was.

The crew he takes charge of is a typical crowd of high-achieving youngsters with heaps of arrogance and ability, and lots of deep-seated insecurities that spring mostly from their lack of experience. One feels it would have been fairer to give them a captain with an equally unfamiliar face, thus allowing them all to build a rapport with each other and the audience on an equal footing. As it is, Bakula is a little bit older, and much more patronizing even than the elder Vulcans who have purportedly kept Earthmen on Earth because they are too volatile to go a-space-faring.



Patrick Stewart as Captain Jean-Luc Picard (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) has a very fine beard

Scott Bakula as Captain Jonathan Archer (*Enterprise*) wins the accolade of Captain Beaky

Keri Korner as Boone (*Enterprise*) is also well endowed in the proboscis department

The problem is, of course, that to an extent the Vulcans are right, and there is a loose allegory going on here of parents allowing their offspring enough space to explore but not giving them the tools with which they can kill themselves before they understand properly how to use them. The kids naturally enough resent this, and want full access to all areas because they think they are ready for anything the universe can throw at them.

Unfortunately, they're not. When I first saw this programme, Scott Bakula's profile struck me as particularly noteworthy – I never noticed any other captain's nose the way I did his, and he quickly became christened Captain Beaky in this house. This felt somehow more appropriate than a simple physical description, so I did some research, and found the original hit record from the late 1970s on the web, and replayed the whole gruesome thing. To save you the trouble, Captain Beaky and his band of animals decide they have to do something about the threat embodied by Hissing Sid the snake; so they lay a trap with Toad as bait, Toad is frightened and hides in a hollow log that turns out to be Sid the Snake, and Cap'n Beaky and his band next see Sid hopping by. They rescue Toad and vanquish Sid but without actually telling us how. This peculiar mixture of maladroitness planning, silly plotting and with-one-bound-he-was-free resolution is stunningly characteristic of the entire series of *Enterprise* stories thus far. Our heroes set off on an ill-prepared mission to return a heroic Klingon messenger to his home world rather than let him die, as the Vulcans advise. *Enterprise* is not fully ready for use, but they go anyway, and having once got away from the nannying Vulcans, are loth to return, and in fact go exploring with their high command's blessing.

Set as it is in the time between the classic *Star Trek* series and the events of the movie *Star Trek: First Contact*, we more elderly viewers might expect the prequel-sense to be strong – this is after all the same franchise, so they should be able to get the continuity right. The episodes as they unreel, however, reveal more about the workings of the minds of the producers than they do about the progeniture of Star Fleet. To be sure, there are all kinds of little touches that are quite evidently meant to refer forward to other things we already know about, and even some adolescent writhing about first contact and the absence of a prime directive, but on the whole what we are presented with is a bunch of do-gooders going out exploring with no real sense of what they are doing, no real plan of where they are going, and no real abilities to deal with what they

encounter. Fer chrissake, they decide after a couple of dangerous encounters that they really ought to go home and have their guns fitted! What is more ludicrous is that, given this incentive, the shipboard engineers then decide they can do this themselves, so, rather than go home, they take the one prototype and work up a functional array before the captain has time to decide to go home and have it done properly. Now all they've got to do is get the torpedoes to go where they're pointed – one does wonder why they never bother to fix problems such as these until their lives or their liberty are at stake.

Another mark of the dead hand of the studio is the *de rigeur* eclectic crew. We don't marvel, as in the past, that they might have an android as an officer, or a black woman in a position of power and influence, or a barely-pubescent boy driving the ship; rather, we ponder on how preponderously white they are. Interestingly, the lack-of-demonstrative-emotion role is shared here between the Vulcan science officer and the gunnery officer, who appears to be the first-ever Englishman on a Paramount starship (Picard might have had an English accent, but he was playing a Frenchman).

I hope to return to Malcolm's Englishness in a future column, and would only mention here that it has always been my contention that Spock was a prototypical Englishman in classic *Star Trek*. For the time being, though, I would like to dwell on the young Vulcan science officer, T'Pol. She looked uncannily familiar to me, but I couldn't place her until quite by accident I caught

another 1960s rerun recently. One can forgive her for appearing wooden, as it would appear to be a constraint of the part she is playing (unlike Scott Bakula who is just naturally that way). It can't be easy trying to act with that peculiarly smooth egg-shell finish to her face (she's the only Vulcan I've ever seen with no trace of green in her make-up), what looks like a piece of an old shagpile rug as a wig, eyes that appear to be fixed in focus, huge lips that hardly move when she speaks, and an impossibly pneumatic figure wrapped in what can best be described as an off-cut of curtain material. Watching Captain Scarlet for the first time ever (and the last!) recently, it suddenly came to me that T'Pol is a perfect 21st-century manifestation of one of Gerry Anderson's *Thunderbirds* puppets, and I now have to stop myself looking for the strings when she is on screen.

Of course, she is every small boy's stereotype of a dream woman, and, given the *Thunderbird's* parallel, it suddenly becomes transparent that the reason she is like she is, and indeed the reason all the plots seem to resemble cowboy movies I saw at Saturday matinees many years ago, is that, unlike previous iterations of the *Star Trek* franchise that attempted to continue to exploit a pre-existent audience, *Enterprise* is not aimed at pleasing my generation, but rather at garnering a whole new fan audience from the current generation of 12-14-year old boys.

I feel sorry for this new generation if this is the best 35 years of *Star Trek* development can offer them. While one hopes Paramount will persevere and succeed with this project, there is really precious little here for the life-long *Star Trek* fan other than the odd bone of prequel continuity thrown to us to keep us quiet, decrepit toothless dogs of an audience that we are. The problem with *Enterprise*, and indeed the other shows produced under his name, is that Gene Roddenberry is gone. His name still appears in the titles, but his towering humanistic compassion and his certain grasp of what strangeness would appeal to an audience is missing, and missed, at least by me. Instead, we have pre-digested pabulum with just a hint of the spice that was the danger of thinking freely that so invigorated my youth. Far from further adorning Gene Roddenberry's reputation, *Enterprise* the television programme is, I suspect, the last gasp of his once-proud vision. From Roddenberry's point-of-view, the title of this show, implicitly back-formed from HMS *Enterprise* (its namesake sailing ship, featured in the opening credits), would not be the inappropriate "Enter: Prize" but the more apposite "Exit: Wooden Spoon."

Evelyn Lewes



Enterprise:
Jolene Blalock as
T'Pol – you can't
see the strings

Sf-noir is the essence of first-novelist Richard Morgan's vision, for *Altered Carbon* (Gollancz, £16 hc, £10.99 trade pb) is a dark amalgam of *noir* and science fiction, reading like William Gibson with yet more narrative energy, or Michael Marshall Smith with fewer jokes and no cats. Morgan, a tutor at Strathclyde University, has claimed that the actions of his novel's psychotic protagonist, one Takeshi Kovacs, help to prevent real-life tragedy: "As long as Kovacs is out there, committing mayhem on the page, I can manage not to murder my more obstreperous students." That being so, we can only hope that Kovacs's first outing isn't his last, or Strathclyde University's admissions will tumble.

It could be argued that *sf-noir* already has a label: cyberpunk. And the trappings of cyberpunk are on show right enough in this novel – say hello to AIs galore, virtual unrealities, and viral weaponry – but each is placed ever more centrally in the service of a retooled *noir* storyline. *Altered Carbon* makes the case for *sf-noir* deserving a separate moniker, and stepping out of cyberpunk's long shadow.

Down these intertextually dense, mean streets, Kovacs murders and intuitively his way through danger. Morgan's leading character is *sf-noir*'s archetypal borderline psychopath and sentimental hero rolled into one tidy package. Not so much an antihero as an heroic oxymoron, Kovacs is always ready to fight, and always ready to help fight the good fight. Morgan's authorial rationalization of these tendencies is locked into the character's history. Kovacs is an ex-UN envoy, which in a sly piece of politicized humour means he's an augmented (if not demented) killing machine. Perhaps Kovacs doesn't have to make sense psychologically, only mythically and generically, but having said that, Morgan does outline Takeshi's childhood traumas towards the novel's conclusion, making a further attempt to root his wise man/killer character in a culturally plausible psycho-history.

The events of *Altered Carbon* revolve around "re-sleeving," which is the transfer of one person's memories and consciousness into a new body, or "sleeve." This is the *novum* at the alien heart of the book. It is intriguingly developed by Morgan, who spins a convincing social world out of and around the practice of re-sleeving. Rebirth comes at a price, so the more sophisticated versions of the technology are the province of a wealthy elite who can afford to "back up" their memories and identities each day in case of accident, or house multiple versions of themselves in cloned or different bodies. The re-sleeving havenots, rather literally on the other

Mediascapes and Metaphors

Matt Hills

hand, cannot afford to buy back their original bodies, and so are condemned to inferior, off-the-shelf models. Morgan integrates commerce into his fabulation, but also dwells intriguingly on re-sleeving's religious and political ramifications as well as on its everyday human costs.

If you come back in a different body will you still be loved by your husband or wife? For that matter, will you still be attracted by them? Morgan dramatizes these questions through the spiky relationship that develops between Kovacs and local cop Ortega. For Kovacs has been placed in the body of Elias Ryker, Ortega's former

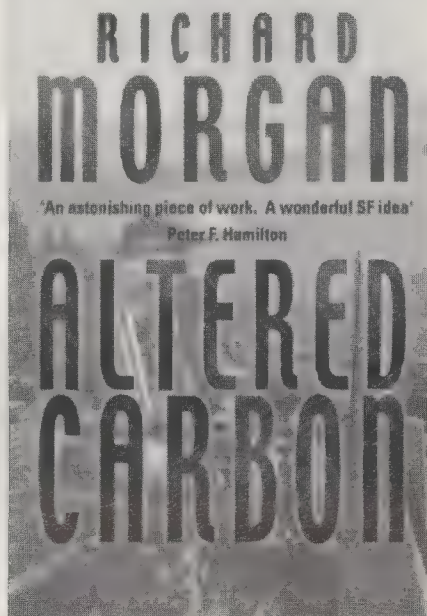


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lover. Is the attraction underpinning love's development about bodies, minds, or both? The viciously bio-determinist answer given here is that it all comes down to bodies and pheromones: in Ryker's body, Kovacs itches to touch Ortega, and she is drawn to him, whereas out of this sleeve Kovacs finds that there is no chemistry between the two of them. Although it is implied that Ortega has fallen in love with Kovacs the mind/person rather than simply jumping Ryker's body, this is seemingly our hero's unique privilege and validation. By contrast, Irene Elliott, Kovacs' eventual partner in crime, is apparently able to save her marriage only when she recovers her original body. And Laurens Bancroft, Kovacs's enforced client, exists in a marriage hundreds of years old only by entirely separating out the carnal and the conscious. Again, mind and body are divorced, and the result is dysfunction, pathology and perversion.

Combining thought-provoking ideas with page-turning, intense narrative is no mean feat, but *Altered Carbon* delivers. The engine of its narrative is a conceit which possesses all the elegance of a classic locked-room mystery. Kovacs is hired by Laurens Bancroft, an extremely wealthy and long-lived "Meth," to investigate his own murder/suicide. Of course, since he possesses full back-up facilities, Bancroft is able to download his consciousness into a cloned body, losing only hours of memory and experience, albeit the hours that led up to somebody blowing his brains out with his own gun at close range. And Bancroft wants to know whodunnit...

Richard Morgan raises complex issues via accomplished speculation,



and no doubt his emphasis on the importance of our bodies (which are never just “meat” here, other than in the eyes of the arch-villain of the piece) means to illuminate the fundamental absurdity of re-sleeving. But while stressing the “original” materiality and matter of humanity, Morgan maybe overstates his case. Of course, the complexity of *Altered Carbon* cannot be reduced to a single message or verdict, despite the fact that its conclusion – involving the right to be reborn – powerfully dismisses Catholic opposition to re-sleeving. Religion is really dead; technoscience is the new universal religion. But things aren’t so clear-cut. This is a new religion that reduces consciousness to the role of ghost in the machine, a thoroughgoing materialism that leaves victims in its wake.

These are contradictions that Morgan does not, cannot, finally resolve. Re-sleeving sustains fantasies of disembodied immortality, and of the body as exchangeable: *Altered Carbon* wants to alter and subvert those fantasies – critique them, even – but it also wants to celebrate the selfsame fantasies in their democratized guise. Jacking it in and jacking into it, *Altered Carbon* is ultimately as schizo as its protagonist, and twice as entertaining.

In *More Than Night* (University of California Press, 1998), a wide-ranging study of *film noir* and its many reinventions, American academic James Naremore argues that *noir* is less a genre and more a “mediascape,” by which he means “a loosely related collection of perversely mysterious motifs or scenarios that circulate through all... information technologies.” Naremore tracks *noir* through its vast array of invocations, mentioning “ambitious novelists such as William Gibson,” along with TV series such as *The X-Files* and *Millennium*. But perhaps Naremore, the academic-as-detective, has missed a trick. Because the *noir* mediascape has significantly intersected with another “mediascape,” another supragenre circulating through film, TV, DVD, video, videogames, graphic novels and just plain novels, as well as any other “information technology” you care to mention. In short, Naremore’s blind spot is *sf-noir*, its absence being more than apparent in his description of William Gibson as “an ambitious novelist...” No mention of cyberpunk or *sf*, then.

Naremore’s blind spot, however, is *Altered Carbon*’s *raison d’être*. The entwined “mediascapes” of *sf-noir* are given a refreshing burst of life by Richard Morgan, who on the strength of this debut looks set to become one of *sf-noir*’s best, diamond-bright practitioners.

Moving from a new authorial find to the work of a well-established favourite, we have a book billed as Ramsey Campbell’s “first full-length supernatural novel for four years,” *The Darkest Part of the Woods* (PS Publishing, £35/\$55 hc, £55/\$80 slipcased). By my admittedly rough reckoning, this is something like Campbell’s 22nd novel published under his own name. And it is also something of a coup for Peter Crowther and Simon Conway’s PS Publishing. Having already published novellas from writers such as Kim Newman and Michael Marshall Smith, and boasting forthcoming titles by Mark Morris and Stephen Gallagher, as well as a collection of Ramsey Campbell’s essays and occasional writings, PS seem to have cornered the *sf/horror/fantasy* fan target-market. Produced in limited-edition print runs, these novellas and novels are all instant collectors’ items. And if *The Darkest Part of the Woods* is anything to go by, PS’s output isn’t just rare or collectable – it’s excellent with it.

Ramsey Campbell’s contribution to the PS Publishing schedules shows him settling into a pattern established in earlier works, a pattern where narrative arguably plays second fiddle to an atmosphere carefully crafted by the use of imagery and metaphor. And although I’d suggest that the matter of metaphor is as important, if not more so, than the book’s plot, I’ll say a bit about plotting first.

Lennox Price, an academic who first came to Goodmanswood to investigate the hallucinations that were plaguing locals, and who wrote an academic study on the subject of mass delusions, is now a resident in the Arbour private hospital... where he sits and looks out over the haunting local wood. And Lennox’s grandson, Sam, has injured himself falling out of a tree while protesting against the Brichester bypass. The histories and fates of each of the Price family, including Sam’s mother and Lennox’s daughter, Heather, her sister Sylvia, and the two sisters’ mother Margo, are all bound up with the local wood, and with what lies at its centre. Sylvia shares her father’s interest in research, having written about folklore and legends, while Margo bases her art around the wood, at first using pieces of bark and branches in her sculptures, and then using a video camera to capture strange effects in the wood itself. The not-so-still central point around which Campbell’s protagonists circulate, the wood is really as much of a character as the human figures depicted.

Campbell’s writing has won many devotees, as well as critical acclaim, and this latest work is a solid continuation of themes and preoccupations that have surfaced before in his writ-

ing; it combines a Lovecraftian sense of impending doom, and of forces breaking through from outside our reality, with an emphasis on the importance of words, and a sharply observed contemporary setting. Mythic supernatural forces exist alongside the realities of science-fiction bookshops, universities, job interviews, and Internet keyword searches. But the initial reality we are presented with, where Lennox Price has succeeded in scientifically understanding and solving the riddle of Goodmanswood – explaining the hallucinations it has inspired as the result of a psychotropic lichen – is never going to hold together for long. Price’s seemingly shaky mental state presages an ever more powerful undermining of science and its authority.

It is books that are repeatedly the source of power and knowledge in this novel, provided that these are books of lore and legend rather than scientific studies. Through a playful couple of chapter titles early on, Campbell sets up the expectation that Lennox Price is seeking a copy of his own academic book, *The Mechanics of Delusion*, only to introduce two other more significant books and two other authors: Sylvia Price and her title *The Secret Woods: Sylvan Myths*, and the journal of one Nathaniel Selcouth, who was executed in 1567. This olde “journall” contains the secrets of Selcouth’s dark arts and experiments, including an attempt to revive his dead mother and the construction of a “final dwelling in woodland between Bristol and Gloucester, on a site he had identified as the focus of powerful occult forces” (p163). It is Selcouth who hovers over the consciousnesses of the Prices, crowding in on their happy family life, and threatening to claim each family member as some kind of victim. The tale’s conclusion may come as something of a surprise, at least in terms of who takes up residence at the Arbour, and on its way towards an unsettling endpoint the novel ratchets up its air of paranoia and pervasive dis-ease. A family secret threatens to tear apart all trust in the Price household, and this shows that Campbell is still as good on nuance and suggestion within characters’ relationships as he is with patterns of uneasy, dark metaphor.

It’s hard not to succumb to Campbell’s incessant iteration of observations and images that cluster around the wood of the book’s title, the almost animate trees of Goodmanswood. Drifting leaves are the colour of paper and parchment, and wooden desks radiate their carpentry presence. And the woods themselves seem to move at the edge of observers’ visions, carrying shadows that flicker and flit as if they’re small animals. On almost every page, no matter what event Campbell is creating, his themed images and

metaphors insinuate themselves slyly into the narrative. In fact, despite revelling in the plot of this novel, at one point I took to spotting wood or tree-derived figures of speech, metaphors, and aspects of back-story or back-ground colour. At one point we witness a ballet class at the Woodland Close community centre where young students are asked by their teacher to "all be trees," and at another point a Christmas tree has to be forcefully ejected from one family home. Trees, trees

everywhere; this theme branches persistently through the novel, but never becomes repetitive. A lesson in aesthetically-controlled association around one subject, *The Darkest Part of the Woods* blends its linguistic play into a tale of possession and summoning that pits elemental forces and arcane knowledges against humanity's innate watchfulness.

Although the edition I read was a proof copy, and so didn't contain Peter Straub's introduction, it could quite

fairly be said that Ramsey Campbell requires little or no introduction. Covering the kind of richly allusive ground that characterizes T. E. D. Klein's *The Ceremonies* or Straub's own *Ghost Story*, Campbell's weird fiction is never stilted or wooden, having a precise cadence and a timbre all of its own. With *The Darkest Part of the Woods*, PS Publishing has undoubtedly added another success to its list of prior achievements.

Matt Hills

There's this crown prince, right, heir to all his father's power and riches, but all he ever dreams about is sailing off and being an explorer like in the adventure stories he consumes in his youth. So his father arranges for a girl to seduce him into accepting his destined role, and it almost works, but he discovers the deception and, heartbroken, throws over the love of his life, runs away to sea, and ends up as a pirate. In his travels as a pirate, he discovers the whereabouts of buried treasure, and plots to return and dig it up next time the pirate ship brings him that way. He recruits others to help him, but when he tries to get to the treasure, is first prevented in a bloody battle, and then recruited into solving its real problem – because really it's a dragon that needs to get home. In helping to make this happen, he first becomes a real explorer, then redeems his past less-than-perfect life as a buccaneer, and finally goes home to reclaim the love of his life. Whether or not they live happily ever after is moot, but, then, this isn't a fairy tale, it's an adventure.

If you're concerned that by describing the plot of Peter Hamilton's latest novel, *Fallen Dragon* (Macmillan, £17.99) in this way I might have spoiled it for you, then stop worrying. For while this high octane adventure yarn is the warp of the novel, the weft is the telling, and the telling is the real delight here. Where some writers give date, time and place at the beginning of each chapter, Hamilton simply moves his locus operandi in a wonderfully cinematic manner, leaving the reader to puzzle out the connections between characters, times and places. As the action takes place on several different worlds at different times, and some of the characters are the same people at different times in their lives, while others are characters in a galactic romance that is being told orally to a group of inattentive infants, it is no mean feat that there is never any question as to who is who and how they all fit together when the revelation comes. Of course, I have written before, of the *Night's Dawn* trilogy, that Hamilton has this uncanny ability to leave many threads dangling, only to pick them up later

The High Adventurer and the Nouveau Noiriste

Paul Brazier

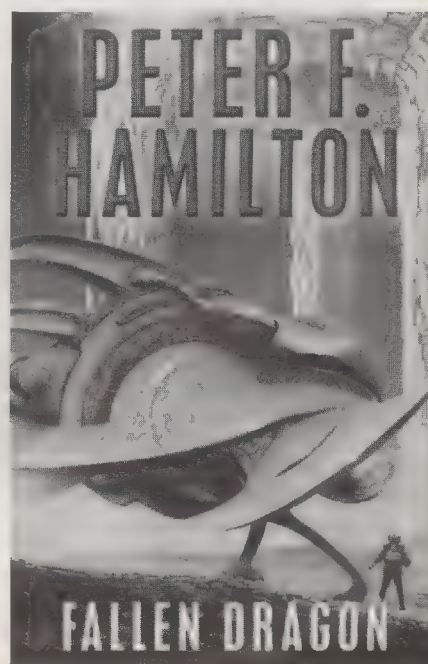
and unswervingly carry on weaving them into the tapestry of his story.

Couching the description in terms of 19th-century thud and blunder pirate tales – I was particularly reminded of *Treasure Island*, although closer inspection has revealed more differences than similarities – does to some extent traduce the achievement here, as a major factor in the enjoyment of Hamilton's work is his science-fictional invention. There are corporate policemen-cum-foot soldiers dressed in a form of body armour known as Skin that is quite literally a part of them in a way I can only previously remember being described in Geoff Ryman's *The Warrior Who Carried Life*. But where in the Ryman this is a powerful metaphor that points up the silliness of transformational magic, here the stuff becomes literally part of the man, powered by enhanced blood that is linked into the human being inside via portals surgically implanted into their necks, and transforming him into an almost invulnerable superman and fighting machine, as if by some kind of inverted vampirism.

Then there is the most colossally wonderful literal wagon-trains-in-space star-jump-gate sequence that

you are ever likely to read; and a stunning finale that takes place, after the strangest of chase sequences, within the photosphere of the red giant star, Aldebaran. Add into this mix Hamilton's usual assumption that personal computers are going to be so intimately interfaced with their users as to appear integral, and an equally massive further progress in computing that gives the resistance an almost insuperable advantage over their apparently more advanced invaders, and what you have end up with is rip-roaring space adventure that will have the pulses thundering of any traditional exploding-spaceships space opera fan such as myself.

And this is not all. The development of the central character is perfectly portrayed, along with cringingly accurate accounts of the kind of boy-girl misunderstandings that adolescents and young adults have to experience in order to learn to avoid them on their route to becoming rounded adults. In fact, this novel approaches perfection in the arena of high space adventure, and if it has any fault at all, it is that this kind of mesmerizingly crystal clear story-telling, where you are told everything and you just have to notice, does finally demand over-wordy



explanatory endings, and the big finale does drag just a tiny bit. But even this is redeemed with a nice little coda that brings the whole massive enterprise back to a perfectly realized happy ending on a proper human-to-human level, with only a little enabling from a technology that spans an entire galaxy and much of time as well.

One thing guaranteed with any Peter Hamilton novel is that you will not be sitting down for a quiet read. What you get is a wonderfully convoluted romp, notable in this case mostly for its mind-stretching gob-smacking galaxy-spanning chutzpah; it's no wonder the man's books are bestsellers, and it will be no surprise when this one joins them.

It is the highest praise to be able to report that arriving at the end of a book only makes one want to go straight back to the beginning and start again. Quite apart from simple value for money, the least this means is that the author has engaged a reader's heart and mind sufficiently for them to want to see how this affect has been achieved. *Fallen Dragon* did this for me, and to a greater or lesser extent so have Hamilton's other novels, and I'm already looking forward to revisiting them all. For the moment, however, another book demands notice.

Happily, leaving Hamilton-space is made thoroughly worthwhile by an equally compelling vision of the future, albeit one that is incomparably differently conceived and evoked. In the second of his Arabesks, *Effendi*, (Earthlight, £12.99), Jon Courtenay Grimwood (JCG) takes us back to the alternative-world Alexandria in North Africa that he first introduced us to in *Pashazade*. Here, the city is called El Iskandriya (which is what the locals call Alexandria here and now), but in this parallel world timeline it has lost none of the pre-eminence it gained from being founded by and named after Alexander the Great more than 2000 years ago. In this timeline, however, the great wars of the 20th century never happened, and thus the politics of the 19th century still obtain, with the city ostensibly making obeisance to Turkey while remaining in all real terms an autonomous city-state where the various powers of the world make their incomprehensible powerplays.

As such, El Iskandriya is more than just a backcloth to the action. Its physical make-up, like any real city, is a concretization of its history. Thus, simply describing the city hints at events in the alternative history and, on its own, such description marks this out as a science-fictional novel par excellence: the background is always a character in an sf novel, to paraphrase Samuel R Delany. That



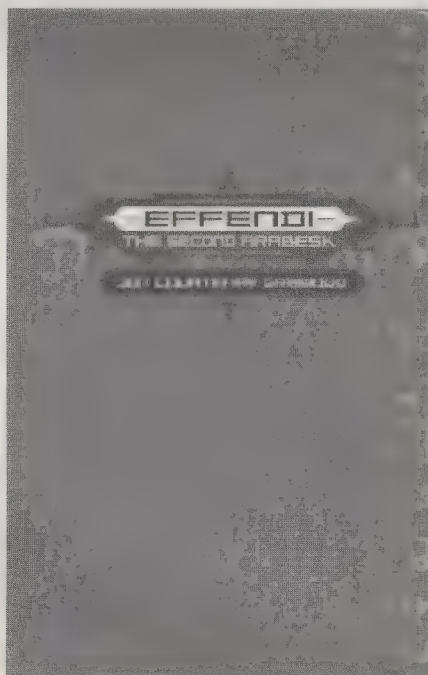
Jon Courtenay Grimwood (left) with China Miéville

Photo: Paul Brazier

the city thus becomes the first in a long line of fascinating characters whose lives are twisted together in JCG's convoluted and sometimes gruesome murder mysteries is a mark of the depth and detailed structure that he deploys to tell his stories.

In the first book, *Pashazade*, Ashraf Bey is introduced. He is a mystery to everyone, even himself, but appears to have powerful friends, and through a combination of influence, intelligence and ruthlessness he solves the murder mystery that is at the novel's heart. Alongside him is a nine-year old girl, his cousin Hani, who in this book he has adopted because in the last book two women, aunts to both of them and guardians to Hani, were both murdered. Hani is a bright, precocious computer genius. The story of the intertwined destinies of these two with their very different pets is the structural backbone of the trilogy, and thus far their stories have been by turns affecting, engrossing and bewildering, so that great anticipation is created of a fine resolution in the third book next year.

Meantime, within such a structure,



each book of a trilogy should be a novel in its own right, and another of JCG's strengths is that he hasn't stunted in addressing this. Both books thus far have at their centres murder mysteries, and are being marketed to a crime audience as well. As such, they stand up well individually, with proper resolutions coming out of left field in the time-honoured fashion for crime novels. But each volume also outlines the character of a powerful major figure in the governance of the city, who significantly then disappears, to be replaced by Ashraf Bey. Far from frustrating this reader, these ribs depending from the structural backbone of Raf and Hani's story only generate higher expectations of the third novel – it is most reminiscent of Kim Stanley Robinson's California trilogy, not in the structure itself so much as the unusual and detailed attention to detail within that structure.

While character and plot are thus fully explored, the convolutions and uncertainties within them are exactly as black-and-white-with-infinite-shades-of-grey-simultaneously as the classic *film-noir* of the 1940s. But what differentiates these stories, what makes them stand out as remarkably powerful new statements, is the way the narrative has a brightly-coloured minimalist overlay of science-fictional hints and highlights that is reminiscent of nothing so much as the extraordinary concoctions of *nouvelle cuisine* – served up on a huge white plate, convoluted and somehow devastatingly attractive, one still can't help but wonder what exactly they are.

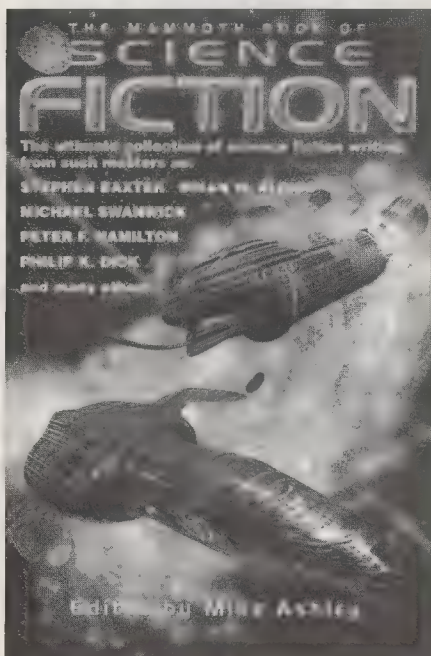
It would appear that in his own search for satisfaction in telling a multi-layered science-fictional crime novel of innocence and character in a frighteningly dangerous world, Jon Courtenay Grimwood has given birth to a new hybrid genre, a kind of *nouvelle-noire* (or *nouveau-noir*?). It is a privilege to watch it emerge in all its mesmeric complexity, and these books go straight into the tiny to-be-read-again-as-soon-as-possible pile, along with Peter Hamilton's.

Paul Brazier

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Poul. **Going for Infinity: A Literary Journal**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30359-0, 416pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf/fantasy collection with autobiographical commentary, first edition; proof copy received; this large volume of 18 stories and extracts, plus previously unpublished reminiscences, seems to have been put together shortly before the author's death in July 2001 as "a celebration and a memoir of Anderson's distinguished 60-year career in science fiction and fantasy" [60 years is a slight exaggeration – more like 55 years, 1947-2001]; recommended as a sampler of some of the author's best fiction.) *May 2002*.

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Science Fiction**. Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-375-5, xiii+498pp, B-format paperback, cover by Pete Rozycki, £6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; not to be confused with earlier books of similar title from the same publisher; this is a wholly new gathering of old and new material designed to cover the spectrum of the sf genre; it contains two previously unpublished stories – "Refugium" by Stephen Baxter and "Ulla, Ulla" by Eric Brown – plus reprint stories from magazines and anthologies, by Brian Aldiss, Mark Clifton, Philip K. Dick, Greg Egan ["The Infinite Assassin," from *Interzone*], Peter F. Hamilton, Colin Kapp, Damon Knight, Geoffrey A. Landis, Robert Reed, Keith Roberts, Kim Stanley Robinson, Eric Frank Russell,



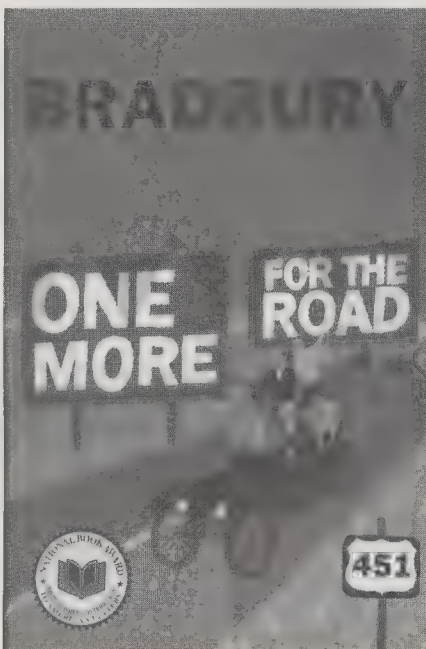
Robert Sheckley, Clifford D. Simak, Michael Swanwick, Connie Willis and others; recommended.) *28th March 2002*.

Bear, Greg. **Eon**. "SF Masterworks, 50." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07316-0, 504pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985; originally published in the same year as his famous *Blood Music* [also a Gollancz "SF Masterwork"], this is one of the two novels which raised Bear to the top rank of American sf authors.) *11th April 2002*.

Bishop, David. **Amorality Tale**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53850-3, 284pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Third Doctor and Sarah Jane Smith, it's set in the East End of London in the 1950s.) *8th April 2002*.

Bova, Ben. **The Rock Rats: Book II of the Asteroid Wars**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30227-6, 384pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Bollinger, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; follow-up to *The Precipice* [2001]; having done the Moon, Mars, Venus and Jupiter, Bova moves on to the Asteroids...) *11th April 2002*.

Bradbury, Ray. **One More for the Road**. Morrow, ISBN 0-06-621106-9, 289pp, hardcover, cover by José Luis Merino, \$24.95. (Sf/horror/fantasy/mainstream collection, first edition; Bradbury's first new collection since the two which came in swift succession, *Quicker Than the Eye* [1996] and *Driving Blind* [1997], it contains 25 stories, none of them collected before, 17 of them apparently written in the past few years and now published for the first time, eight of them reprinted from magazines – in one case, "Time Intervening," dating from as far back as 1947; there's much characteristic material here, and it's good to see Bradbury continuing, well into his 80s.) *2nd April 2002*.



MARCH
2002

Bunch, Chris. **Storm of Wings: Dragonmaster, Book One**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-104-7, 409pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2002; opener in a new trilogy by the Vietnam-veteran author who is an expert in "slam-bang excitement, lusty action and military magic" [in the words of his admirer Julian May]; is there any point in stating that *A Storm of Wings* is a title which has already been used for a modern fantasy novel – by M. John Harrison?) *4th April 2002*.

Clute, John. **Appleseed**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-100-4, 337pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the author's second novel, after a more-than-20-year gap, and his first sf novel – an out-and-out space opera; Stephen Baxter, Neil Gaiman and M. John Harrison all commend it; see the interview with John Clute in *Interzone* 166, and see also the review by David Mathew in that issue.) *4th April 2002*.

Dicks, Terrance. **Warmonger**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53852-X, 287pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Fifth Doctor and Peri, it's by a veteran author who has written over 70 "Doctor Who" novelizations and spinoffs.) *6th May 2002*.

Ebbs, Paul. **The Book of the Still**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53851-1, 276pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, it appears to be a debut novel and is credited on the title page as being "from a story by Paul Ebbs and Richard Jones.") *6th May 2002*.

Fairclough, Robert. **The Prisoner: The Official Companion to the Classic TV Series.** Foreword by Kenneth Griffith. Carlton, ISBN 1-84222-434-4, 144pp, very large format

paperback, £14.99. (Copiously illustrated episode guide to the 1960s sf TV series which starred Patrick McGoohan; first edition; gosh, some things go on forever, don't they?; aged, eccentric Welsh actor Kenneth Griffith's hilarious little foreword is three or four paragraphs of grumpiness in which he implies, without actually stating, that he has been dragged in to write the piece because McGoohan didn't make himself available.) 30th April 2002.

Fisher, Jude. **Sorcery Rising: Book One of Fool's Gold.** Earthlight, 0-7432-2091-9, 502pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99; opening volume of an Icelandic-flavoured high fantasy trilogy; "Jude Fisher" is a pseudonym of HarperCollins/Voyager editor Jane Johnson, who has previously written several cat fantasies in collaboration with M. John Harrison under the joint pseudonym "Gabriel King"; this is her first solo novel, and the publishers are promoting it as "an epic tale of gods, great journeys, love and betrayal... one of fantastical fiction's all-time classics.") 3rd June 2002.

Gemmell, David A. **Ravenheart.** "A Novel of the Rigante." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14675-7, 507pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; follow-up to *Sword in the Storm* [1998] and *Midnight Falcon* [1999] in this Celtic-flavoured heroic fantasy series.) 4th April 2002.

Gemmell, David A. **Stormrider.** "A Novel of the Rigante." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04441-X, 446pp, hardcover, cover by John Bolton, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; last in the tetralogy begun by *Sword in the Storm* [1998], *Midnight Falcon* [1999] and *Ravenheart* [2001].) 4th April 2002.

Gotlieb, Phyllis. **Mindworlds.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87876-1, 253pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; by the grande dame of Canadian sf, it completes a trilogy begun with *Flesh and Gold* [1998] and *Violent Stars* [1999].) May 2002.

Greenberg, Martin H., and John Helfers, eds. **Knight Fantastic.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0052-X, 317pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 15 all-new tales on knightly themes, by Brendan DuBois, Rosemary Edghill, Esther Friesner, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Tanya Huff, Andre Norton, Jean Rabe, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Josepha Sherman, Michelle West, Jane Yolen and others; it's

the latest in a long series of such paperback-original sf, fantasy and horror anthologies produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books – i.e. the ongoing Greenberg/DAW "pulp magazine.") April 2002.

Grimwood, Jon Courtenay. **Pashazade: The First Arabesk.** Earthlight, 0-671-77368-2, 327pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in 2001; opening volume in the "Arabesk" trilogy, set in a timeline where Germany won the First World War and where the Middle East is still dominated by the Ottoman Empire; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 169.) 2nd April 2002.

Haldeman, Joe. **Worlds.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07361-6, 239pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Harris, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1981 [not "1955" as it rather wildly states inside]; the first volume of Haldeman's well-regarded "Worlds" trilogy; after a gap of nine months, it seems Gollancz are resuming this yellow-covered series of trade-paperback reprints [see also under Ian Watson, below] – although this time with semi-pictorial front covers and without jacket flaps.) 18th April 2002.

Hamilton, Peter F., and Ian McDonald. **Watching Trees Grow/Tendeléo's Story.** "Binary 3." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07305-5, 111+103pp, A-format paperback, covers by Jim Burns, £4.99. (Two sf novellas, arranged *dos-à-dos*, first edition in this format; this is half of the anthology *Futures*, edited by Peter Crowther [Gollancz, April 2001], whose individual novellas were first published as slim volumes by the small press PS Publishing in 2000; both novellas were reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 161.) 14th March 2002.



Herbert, Brian, and Kevin J. Anderson. **House Corrinno: Prelude to Dune III.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-75180-0, viii+590pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gerry Grace, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the final volume of a trilogy conceived as a prequel to the late Frank Herbert's bestselling *Dune* [1965]; Brian Herbert is the original author's son; presumably the prolific Kevin J. Anderson ["over eleven million books in print worldwide in 22 languages"] has done most of the writing here.) 18th April 2002.

Jones, J. V. **A Fortress of Grey Ice: Book Two of Sword of Shadows.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-770-6, xvi+654pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; follow-up to *A Cavern of Black Ice* [1999]; the three-year gap seems uncharacteristic for a BCF author of Julie Jones's type – has she experienced some difficulties?) 4th April 2002.

Joyce, Graham. **The Tooth Fairy.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-342-4, 320pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1996; it is, as the publishers remind us, "one of four Graham Joyce novels to have won the British Fantasy Award"; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 117.) 28th March 2002.

Kaveney, Roz, ed. **Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel.** Tauris Parke, ISBN 1-86064-762-6, xv+271pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Collection of critical essays on the horror/fantasy TV shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, first edition; the book is dated "2001" inside, but its publication seems to have slipped into 2002; distribution is handled by St Martin's Press/Palgrave; it consists of ten essays by the editor and friends, plus an episode guide; the contributors are mostly unknown to us, but include such names as Ian Shuttleworth, theatre reviewer for the *Financial Times*, and Boyd Tonkin, literary editor of the *Independent* – so, although this is an American publication it gives a mainly British perspective on *Buffy*; the intellectual level of discussion seems to be high, though not marred by over-academicism [only about half of the contributors are academics], so it looks like a book which serious fans of these shows should seek out.) Late entry: 22nd February publication, received in March 2002.

Kotzwinkle, William. **E.T.: The Book of the Green Planet.** Pocket, ISBN 0-7434-4979-7, 269pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1985; "based on a story by Steven Spielberg" [perhaps for a film which was never made?] this is a sequel to the following item; gentle, humorous, fabular in tone, it would be interesting to know how much of it was really Spielberg's story, and how much was due to novelist Kotzwinkle's own initiative – but we're not told.) 1st April 2002.

Kotzwinkle, William. **E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial.** Pocket, ISBN 0-7434-4978-9, 265pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1982; 20th anniversary edition; based on a screenplay by Melissa Mathison for the film directed by Steven Spielberg, and novelized by a writer of literary repute, this is perhaps as near to being a "classic" movie tie-in as is possible.) 1st April 2002.

Lackey, Mercedes. **The Gates of Sleep.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0060-0, 389pp, hardcover, cover by Jody A. Lee, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it seems to be set mainly in Cornwall and Devon, but it's dedicated New York-wise – to "the Port Authority Police, and their Port Authority co-workers who perished, saving others, September 11, 2001.") April 2002.

Langford, David, and John Grant. **Guts: A Comedy of Manners.** "Warning: Offensive Content!" Cosmos Books [PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933-0045, USA], ISBN 1-58715-336-X, 173pp, trade paperback, \$15 [USA], £12 [UK]. (Humorous horror novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; "John Grant" is a pseudonym of Paul Barnett; written many years ago, but unpublished until now, this a follow-up to the same authors' comic disaster novel *Earthdoom!* [Grafton, 1987]; to order, see the publisher's website: www.cosmos-books.com; Cosmos Books, edited by Sean Wallace, is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher which has now released a large number of titles – most of them unseen by us; we're grateful to co-author Dave Langford for sending us this one; it comes with cover commendations such as: "In the great tradition of Harry Adam Knight!" – Simon Ian Childer; and "Makes *Night of the Crabs* look like *Beatrix Potter!*" – Guy N. Smith.) Late entry: 2001 publication, received in March 2002.

Leggett, Paul. **Terence Fisher: Horror, Myth and Religion.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1167-8, viii+208pp, trade paperback, \$32 [USA], £30.40 [UK]. (Illustrated critical study of the oeuvre of a well-known British horror-film director, first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; Terence Fisher (1904-1980) worked mainly for Hammer Films, and is remembered for his *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* movies; this study, written from a religious perspective by an American church pastor, takes him very seriously indeed: "Fisher is a cinematic version of a longstanding group of British Christian apologists who used fantasy and mysticism to convey the Christian message. This group includes classic literary figures like Edmund Spenser [*The Faerie Queen*], John Milton [*Paradise Lost*], and John Bunyan [*Pilgrim's Progress*] as well as such 20th-cen-

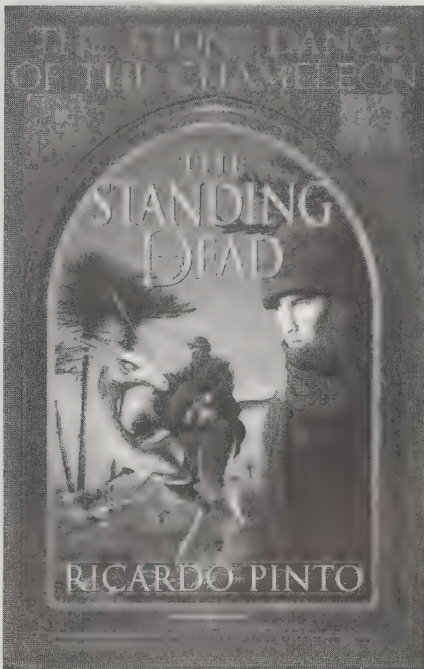
tury writers as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Dorothy L. Sayers" [p2]; there can't be many studies of film directors which begin by comparing their subject to Spenser and Milton!) In the USA, April 2002; in the UK, May 2002.

Le Guin, Ursula. **The Other Wind.** Orion, ISBN 1-84255-205-8, 246pp, hardcover, cover by David Wyatt, £10.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a new tale in the author's highly-praised Earthsea cycle.) 1st May 2002.

McAuley, Paul. **Whole Wide World.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30392-2, 399pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; proof copy received; this is the American first edition of McAuley's recent "near-future police thriller".) May 2002.

Marillier, Juliet. **Child of the Prophecy: Book Three of the Sevenwaters Trilogy.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224738-0, 577pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £11.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2001; conclusion of this romantic Celtic-fantasy trilogy by a New Zealand-born author who now lives near Perth, Australia.) 2nd April 2002.

Marks, Laurie. **Fire Logic.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87887-7, 335pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Suzy McKee Charnas commends it, and usefully summarizes it for us as "a strong, fast-paced tale of war and politics in a fantasy world where magic based on the four elements of alchemy not only works but powerfully affects the lives of those it touches"; the author, previously known as Laurie J. Marks [born 1957], wrote a number of DAW Books paperback-original fantasies in the late 1980s and early 1990s.) May 2002.



Mathison, Melissa, and others. **E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial. From Concept to Classic. The Illustrated Story of the Film and the Filmmakers.** Introduction by Steven Spielberg. Pocket, ISBN 0-743-45024-8, 192pp, very large format paperback, £15.99. (Copiously illustrated sf movie screenplay, plus other material on the background of the film, first published in the USA, 2002; this is a 20th-anniversary publication, celebrating the famous movie directed by Steven Spielberg, and containing Melissa Mathison's screenplay in full, with annotations, plus interviews with the film's personnel and other matter.) 1st April 2002.

May, Julian. **Sagittarius: An Adventure of the Rampart Worlds.** "The adventure concludes!" Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648215-5, 373pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the subtitle on the cover reads "The Rampart Worlds: Book 3.") 2nd April 2002.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Scion of Cyador.** "Book Eleven in the Saga of Recluce." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-101-2, 819pp, A-format paperback, cover by Richard Kaylin, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000 [not "2002" as the publishers imply inside]; the prolific Mr Modesitt has a reputation for being at the hard-edged, scientifically-minded end of the Big Commercial Fantasy field.) 4th April 2002.

Parkin, Lance. **Trading Futures.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53848-1, 249pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, it's set in a overly pacified, electronically monitored near future when "there is no one left for the United States and the Eurozone to fight – except each other.") 8th April 2002.



Pinto, Ricardo. **The Standing Dead: Book Two of The Stone Dance of the Chameleon Trilogy.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04558-0, 525pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the Portuguese-born Scottish author's second novel, follow-up to *The Chosen* [1999] – after a three-year gap.) 9th May 2002.

Rankin, Robert. **The Fandom of the Operator.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14897-0, 367pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Alexander based on a sculpture by the author, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; reviewed by Mat Coward in *Interzone* 175; "a book about death to celebrate a new life," according to the author's dedication.) 4th April 2002.

Robinson, Kim Stanley, ed. **Nebula Awards Showcase 2002.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45878-8, vi+292pp, trade paperback, cover by Ray Lundgren, \$15. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains fiction by Eleanor Arnason, Greg Bear, Terry Bisson, Gardner Dozois, Linda Nagata and Walter Jon Williams, plus a considerable amount of non-fiction commentary on the field, by John Clute, Gwyneth Jones, Damon Knight, Paul McAuley, Gene Wolfe and others; an interesting entry in this recently revived Nebula Awards anthology series, the previous volumes of which we haven't seen.) April 2002.

Schroeder, Karl. **Permanence.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30371-X, 447pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by the Canadian author of the well-received *Ventus* [2000], it appears to be a space opera, "set against a background of interstellar intrigue and warring empires.") May 2002.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of The Lord of the Rings.** "Large Print Edition." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-713663-3, 513pp [plus "Foreword" and "Prologue" on unnumbered pages], hardcover, cover by the author, £20. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1954; a large-print edition was first published by Clio Press in 1990; volumes two and three, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, are also reissued simultaneously in the same format, priced at £20 each; the original Big Commercial Fantasy novel [not that Tolkien ever intended it as such] is now made available for the hard-of-sight, complete with fold-out maps.) 2nd April 2002.

Watson, Ian. **The Jonah Kit.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07389-6, 221pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1975; about intelligent whales and much else, this was Watson's second novel and a winner of the British SF Association Award as the best sf book of its year.) 18th April 2002.

Weaver, Tom. **Science Fiction Confidential: Interviews with 23 Monster Stars and Filmmakers.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1175-9, viii+312pp, hardcover, \$38.50 [USA], £36.60 [UK]. (Illustrated collection of interviews with sf-and-horror movie personnel, first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; this is, we think, Mr Weaver's eighth volume of interviews with actors, directors, producers and other "makers" of yesteryear's fantastic films; among the subjects this time around, many of them very minor figures indeed, are Eve Brent, Audrey Dalton, Alex Gordon, David Hedison, Denny Miller and Dan O'Herlihy – although the last-named is actually a notable Irish actor who appeared in at least one of Luis Bunuel's films among much else.) May 2002.

Westfahl, Gary, George Slusser and Kathleen Church Plummer, eds. **Unearthly Visions: Approaches to Science Fiction and Fantasy Art.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 98." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-31705-4, vii+166pp, hardcover, £53.95. (Collection of essays on sf and fantasy illustration, first published in the USA, 2002; this is the American first edition with a British price indicated, available in the UK from Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; it contains a dozen essays, probably first delivered as academic conference papers [although that is not indicated], by Gregory Benford, John Clute, "John Grant" [Paul Barnett], Howard V. Hendrix, Lynne Lundquist, Carol MacKay, Samuel H. Vasbinder and others; artists studied in particular include Frank Frazetta, Richard M. Powers, and the various people who have illustrated J. R. R. Tolkien's work; recommended – although, given its subject matter, this is one Greenwood volume that would have benefited from illustrations [it's totally unillustrated].) Late entry: February publication, received in March 2002.

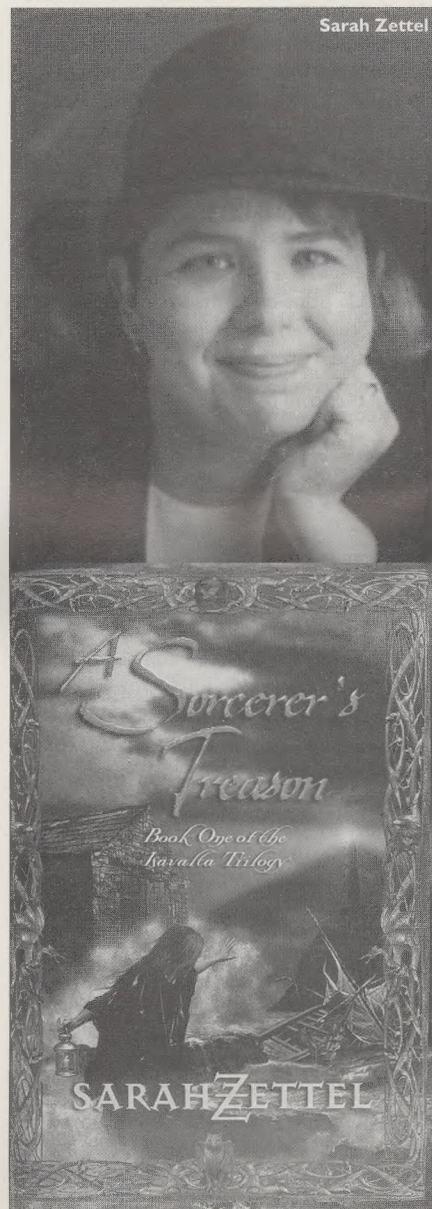
Williams, Liz. **Empire of Bones.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-58377-8, 323pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the second novel by a British writer whose short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative* and elsewhere; see the interview with her in the present issue of *IZ*.) April 2002.

Wolfe, Gene. **Peace.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 28." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07376-4, 264pp, B-format paperback, cover by Anne Sudworth, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1975; a beautifully written, tricky and mysterious novel, originally published as "mainstream.") 11th April 2002.

Zebrowski, George. **Swift Thoughts.** Introduction by Gregory Benford. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana,

IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-08-8, xii+311pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$24.95. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains two dozen stories, mainly "philosophical" and ideas-rich sf pieces of one kind or another, reprinted from various magazines and anthologies – including two from *Interzone*, "The Last SF Story of the 20th Century" and "Catch the Sleep Ship: The First SF Story of the 21st Century"; recommended.) April 2002.

Zettel, Sarah. **A Sorcerer's Treason: Book One of the Isavaltia Trilogy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711399-4, 525pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; yet another Big Commercial Fantasy, by an American author [born 1966] who has previously written four sf novels, including *Reclamation* [1996], winner of the *Locus* Best First Novel Award, and *Fool's War* [1997], which was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award as best paperback original of its year.) 2nd April 2002.



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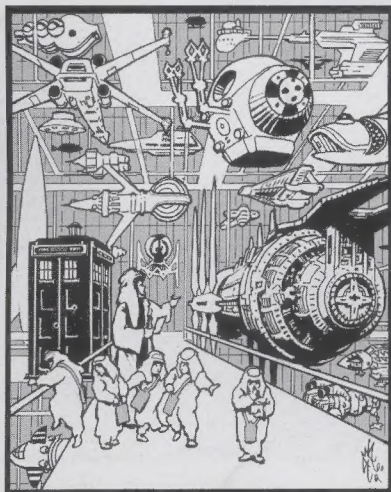
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